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To cite this article: Lara Seefeld, Asuman Buyukcan-Tetik & Susan Garthus-Niegel (2022) The transition to parenthood: perspectives of relationship science theories and methods, Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology, 40:2, 105-107, DOI: [10.1080/02646838.2022.2039864](https://doi.org/10.1080/02646838.2022.2039864)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02646838.2022.2039864>



Published online: 15 Mar 2022.



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EDITORIAL



## The transition to parenthood: perspectives of relationship science theories and methods

The majority of mothers are in a committed romantic relationship during the perinatal period, either with the child's father or another partner. Despite this fact, parents are surprisingly rarely studied as a dyad in the field of perinatal psychology. In this Editorial, we argue that research on the transition to parenthood could benefit considerably from relationship science theories and methods offering new perspectives on pregnancy, childbirth, the bonds between family members, and family well-being. In the following, we will present a selection of theories, concepts, and data analysis methods from relationship science and discuss how they could enrich future research in perinatal psychology.

According to Bowen's *Family Systems Theory*, members of a family form a unit of individuals whose expectations, behaviours, and emotions are interdependent. The couple relationship represents a subsystem within the family and may benefit or suffer from pronounced changes, such as the transition to parenthood. One reason for this is that having a child can be a source of dyadic stress for parents: partners' experiences of and reactions to stress (e.g. emotions, behaviours) mutually influence each other. Chronic dyadic stress may result in an increased risk for depression and anxiety as well as decreased partner support and relationship satisfaction in both parents. However, the interdependence of parents also implies that the resources of one parent may extend to the other parent. For instance, partners' positive emotions can elevate their relationship satisfaction after the birth of a child (Don et al., 2021). Furthermore, parents' emotions and behaviours towards each other may influence parent-child interactions and, thus, child well-being and development, confirming that various subsystems within a family are all interconnected.

One essential factor for maintaining a healthy couple relationship during the perinatal period seems to be the couple's successful attempts at handling daily stressors together, which is called dyadic coping in relationship science. If one parent's individual coping resources are insufficient or if both parents face the same stressful event, dyadic coping can relieve stress for both partners and strengthen their parental confidence as well as relationship quality. If both parents are satisfied with their relationship, this might act as a buffer against postpartum mental health difficulties in parents. However, it is crucial to note that the link between relationship quality and mental health of the parents is bidirectional. On the one hand, parents' positive and negative interactions affect their levels of postpartum depression and anxiety (Figueiredo et al., 2018). On the other hand, symptoms of postpartum depression may predict the couple's relationship satisfaction up to two years postpartum (Garthus-Niegel et al., 2018).

Individual characteristics and experiences from prior family relationships or one's own upbringing also affect the well-being of and relationships between family members. *Attachment Theory* proposes that everyone develops a working model of

perceiving attachment figures as well as patterns of interacting with them. These patterns are shaped by former relationships and experiences and known as attachment styles. During the transition to parenthood, the impact of attachment styles on relationships within the family may be more pronounced than usual (Rholes & Paetzold, 2019). To illustrate, attachment styles may affect the parent-child bond and relationship satisfaction because anxious partners may feel jealous of their partner's attention to the child. Furthermore, anxiously attached people expect high levels of support from their partner but tend to under-perceive the support provided to them, leading to low relationship satisfaction. Simultaneously, the transition to parenthood might trigger a change in the parents' attachment styles, because they are confronted with new information (e.g. newly acquired behaviours, both partners' reactions to the child), which may contradict their previous assumptions on attachment figures and relationships.

To accommodate these complex family dynamics in research, studies need to rely on dyadic and family-level analyses, which have been used in relationship science for many years but are underused in perinatal psychology. The Actor-Partner Interdependence Model allows investigating the effects of partners' variables (e.g. attachment style) on their and the other partner's outcomes (e.g. parent-child interaction), known as actor and partner effects, respectively (Cook & Kenny, 2005). Furthermore, applying the Truth and Bias Model, researchers can examine partners' accurate, over/under-perceived, and projected evaluations about each other (West & Kenny, 2011). For instance, do mothers accurately judge their partner's attachment to the child, or do they under/over-perceive it? What are the sources of these accurate and biased perceptions? Dyadic Response Surface Analysis can be used to seek out the impact of within-couple differences and similarities (Schönbrodt et al., 2018). To illustrate, are mothers most likely to receive support when both partners are low on anxious attachment? Lastly, researchers can extend this dyadic approach to three or four-member families by including siblings or grandparents and use the Social Relations Model to disentangle family, actor, partner, and relationship effects (Kenny & La Voie, 1984). It is possible to show, for example, whether the mother's perception of father support stems from the family environment, the perceiver's or supporter's characteristics, or the unique relationship between the parents.


To summarise, perspectives of relationship science can deepen our understanding of the driving forces behind changes in family relationships during the transition to parenthood. Future studies should consider these perspectives, including but not limited to family members' interdependence, attachment styles, and relationship quality, as crucial correlates of postpartum well-being. Finally, the statistical models used in relationship science could enable the investigation of exciting and innovative research questions and highlight the role of the couple and family dynamics in the transition to parenthood.

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