THE ROLE OF THE FATHER IN THE PERINATAL PERIOD (AND BEYOND)

Dr. Martín Maldonado
The role of the father

- In the origin of pregnancy
- During the pregnancy
- During the delivery of the baby
- In the Postnatal Period
- Attachment to father
- Importance in early years
Father: How does a pregnancy come about?

- Who is the father?
- Potential reaction in case of pregnancy?
- Who wanted (or did not want) the pregnancy?
- What is the TRANSITION TO FATHERHOOD?
What do we know about fathers?

- Very little is known empirically
- Most research focuses on the mother-infant dyad
- Father as a “black continent” in mental health
- What is the importance of the father?
Future father and pregnancy (Father involved)

- News of the pregnancy
- Stages in the transition to fatherhood
- Reactions of the future mother have an impact on her partner
- Societal expectations, pressures, needs have an impact on adjustment
Father and pregnancy

- Future mother’s emotional life:
  - Acceptance of pregnancy
  - Reverie
  - Imaginary baby. Fantasmatic baby
  - Making space and “nesting”
- Father’s reaction may mirror maternal reactions
Father and pregnancy

- 220 future fathers.

- Highest stress the middle phase of pregnancy

- Higher stress the younger the future father, and the shorter the couple’s relationship

- High stress = negative impact on relationship with partner

- More problematic relationship with baby

- (Buist et al, 2000)
‘COUVADE’ and father

- Couvade is a culturally-sanctioned construction
- In more intense ritualistic form the father may take over the phenomena of the pregnancy and the pains during delivery
- Attenuated forms in Westernized cultures
Couvade

- (Conner and Denson, 1990)
- Review of studies of couvade
- It is more a “dimensional phenomenon” i.e. very common but varies in intensity and number of symptoms
- Range of frequency from 11-97%
Couvade studies

- (Clinton, 1987)
- Men “expecting” and not expecting compared:
  - Higher incidence of colds (expecting)
  - Higher weight gain in 3rd trimester
  - Higher frequency of irritability
Couvade studies. ctd

- “Expecting fathers” higher incidence of insomnia
- Higher incidence of anxiety and restlessness
- More somatic symptoms
- More insomnia and more anxiety
Couvade

- (Strickland, 1987). Additional Factors
- More symptoms: the more experienced the father
- Lower socioeconomic status, Afroamerican father, unplanned pregnancy
Couvade symptoms

- (Strickland study)
- Back aches
- Sleeping difficulty
- Increased appetite
- Fatigue
- Restlessness
Causes of couvade?

- Envy toward woman’s ability to carry baby?
- Unconscious aggression?
- Identification with spouse?
- Ambivalence toward pregnancy?
Future father’s anxiety during pregnancy

- Related to multiple factors
- Economic pressures, worry about supporting child (and perhaps spouse)
- New role as a “protector”
- Cost of hospitalization. Course of delivery
- Concerns about sexuality (in spouse and self)
Anxiety during pregnancy

- Future father: Changes in one’s relationship with own parents
- Change in relationship to family of origin
- Change in relationship to friends
- Having to put one’s needs aside to prioritize those of the child and spouse

(Glazer, 1989)
Psychological adjustment to pregnancy

- Transition to fatherhood
- From man and husband to ---father
- Change in the structure and functioning of family
- From dyadic relationship to triadic one
Psychological work

- First resolving (normal) ambivalence toward pregnancy
- Developing attachment to fetus (role of ultrasound? Role of perceiving movements in womb?)

“ I am able to care for the baby”

Make space (nest) for baby and family
Reaction toward pregnant spouse

- Styles of reaction (May, 1980, 1982)
- 1. AN OBSERVER
- 2. EXPRESSIVE REACTION
- 3. INSTRUMENTAL REACTION
Reactions ctd

- OBSERVER
- Man remains in the periphery of pregnancy
- Prefers to observe to have greater control of self: “see what happens”
- Not that he does not care
Reactions ctd

- EXPRESSIVE REACTION
- Active participant in pregnancy
- Very involved
- More likely to experience pregnancy symptoms himself
Reactions ctd

- INSTRUMENTAL REACTION
  - Sees himself as a helper
  - Assist spouse so that everything goes well
  - Arrangements for delivery, prenatal visits
  - Shows his feelings through actions
Stages in reaction to pregnancy (May, 1982)

- **Annunciation** of pregnancy. Starts with suspicion and then confirmation of pregnancy

- **Moratorium** period. (12-25th week). Emotional distance from pregnancy

- **Focusing** After 25th-30th week. Preparation for delivery, etc.
Father and delivery

- Traditionally men had a very limited (peripheral) role in the delivery.
- Delivery was an affair for women (midwife, mother, mother in law, sisters, other women helpers).
- In many cultures taboo about presence of men.
“New role” for the father in delivery

- In some industrialized societies men are “expected” to attend delivery

- Do they like it?

- Do they help the delivering spouse?
New role…

- Johnson (2002) UK. Interview 52 fathers
- Father as “team member”
- Father as “witness”
- Father as “coach”
- Most thought positive, some would prefer not to have been there.

(see Wikander, Sweden)
New role

- Presence of father in delivery room may allow early contact and “bonding”

- Bonding associated with better attachment father/child later on
Father and infant

- Increasingly more “sharing” of caregiving between father and mother
  (women in workforce, fathers take over role as caregivers from extended family)
- Men can have an intimate and satisfying relationship with baby and child!
  (Pruett, 2000)
Father and infant

- Role of hormones in “maternal instinct”

- Role of hormones in father’s nurturing behavior toward baby
Father and infant

- Bowlby thought role of the father was “indirect”
- Through supporting the mother so she could be emotionally available to the baby
- “mothering” the mother
- What about “direct role”?
Father and infant

- Father of newborn, similar stress response to the cry of the baby (as mothers)
- Father capable of “recognizing own baby” blindfolded by only touching the hands (without smelling)
- Can recognize also by odor

- Kaitz et al, 1992