
THE PERCEPTION OF PARENTING COUPLES ENGAGED IN LONG-TERM MARRIAGES¹

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ABSTRACT. Given the increasingly contemporary debate about the relationship between parenthood and conjugality, this study aimed to understand the perception that spouses engaged in long-term marriages have about parenthood. A total of 25 couples were interviewed; they had been married for 39.5 years and were aged 64.1 years old on average, and had three to four children. Audio-recorded interviews with the parents were subjected to content analysis and results highlighted parenthood as synonymous with support, responsibility and learning for the couple, a way to be a good example for descendants, as well as an admirable attribute in a partner. It is concluded that parenthood is perceived as a requirement in the development process of couples engaged in long-term relationships. Long-term marriages rest on some traditional values, like the raising of children, with little experimentation of new parental roles and possibility to reinterpret what it means to be a family.

Keywords: Parenthood; marital relationships; marriage counseling.

A PERCEPÇÃO DA PARENTALIDADE DE CÔNJUGES ENGAJADOS EM CASAMENTOS DE LONGA DURAÇÃO

RESUMO. Tendo em vista o debate cada vez mais contemporâneo acerca das relações entre parentalidade e conjugalidade, o objetivo deste estudo foi compreender a percepção da parentalidade de cônjuges engajados em casamentos de longa duração. Foram entrevistados 25 casais unidos, em média, havia 39,5 anos, com média de idade de 64,1 anos e com três a quatro filhos. A partir de entrevistas audiogravadas e submetidas à análise de conteúdo, os resultados destacaram a parentalidade como sinônimo de apoio, responsabilidade e aprendizado para o casal, como forma de oferecer bom exemplo para os descendentes e também como atributo a ser admirado no parceiro. Conclui-se que a parentalidade é percebida como uma exigência no processo de desenvolvimento dos casais longevos. A conjugalidade de longa duração repousa sobre alguns valores tradicionais, como a criação dos filhos com pouca experimentação de novos papéis e de possibilidades de releituras acerca do que é ser família.

Palavras-chave: Parentalidade; relações conjugais; aconselhamento conjugal.

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LA PERCEPCIÓN DE LA RELACIÓN PARENTAL DE CONYUGUES EN CASAMIENTOS DE LARGA DURACIÓN

RESUMEN. Teniendo en vista un debate cada vez más contemporáneo, con respecto a la relación entre parentalidad y conyugalidad, el objetivo de este estudio fue comprender la percepción sobre parentalidad de conyugues comprometidos en casamientos de larga duración. Fueron entrevistadas 25 parejas unidas en media a 39,5 años, con media de edad de 64,1 años teniendo entre tres a cuatro hijos. A partir de entrevistas audio gravadas y sometidas a análisis de contenido, los resultados destacaron la parentalidad como sinónimo de apoyo, responsabilidad y aprendizaje para la pareja, a fin de ofrecer un buen ejemplo para los descendientes, pero también, como atributo a ser admirado en su cónyuge. Se concluye que la parentalidad es percibida como una exigencia en el proceso de desenvolvimiento de casamientos longevos. La conyugalidad de larga duración reposa sobre algunos valores tradicionales, como la creación de los hijos con poca experimentación de nuevos papeles y de posibilidades de relecturas acerca de lo que es ser familia.

Palabras-clave: Parentalidad; conyugalidad; casamiento de larga duración.

Introduction

Parenthood is a hard construct to define. This is due to its relational nature dependent on the sociocultural context in which it is being addressed (Barroso & Machado, 2010). Zornig (2010) states that it is a term of relatively recent use and that Psychology stands out in studies about the construction of what it means to be a father and a mother. The transition to parenthood is generally understood as a moment of crisis in one's development, given the need for a couple to begin to carry out parental activities, which involves more responsibility, assumption of new roles and adjustment in the family configuration.

In this sense, being a father or a mother is an experience that involves uncertainties and challenges, requiring a number of skills, resources and flexibility to deal with the new demands that emerge (Borsa & Nunes, 2011; Pratti & Koller, 2011). Such changes are not restricted only to the parental care routine and concerns of material nature, but also to the affective inclusion of the new member into the family and the assumption of new social roles and bonding (Benghozi, 2010).

The transition to parenthood, in normative terms, occurs after the transition to conjugality; in this way, the assumption of parental roles takes place in a structure which used to be inhabited exclusively by the couple. With the arrival of a child, the couple needs to make several adjustments, which demands greater emotional involvement and challenges inherent to the tasks of being a father and a mother (Féres-Carneiro & Magalhães, 2014; Alby & Vives, 2015). When thinking about long-term marriages, that is, those lasting over 30 years, the care for children, in general, ceases to be a central activity and the couple enters another phase and spends more time together, possibly with their children having already moved out of home to study, work or even start their own families. However, many marriages do not survive the departure of children from home and consequently may culminate in divorce (Norgren, Souza, Kaslow, Hammerschmidt, & Sharlin, 2004).

However, even with the difficulty in facing such a detachment, long-term couples may represent some sort of conjugal seal in the context of long-term marriages, whereas years ago the continuity of the marital bond was something greatly valued even if it endured unsatisfactorily only as a way to be an "example" for children, that is. It is worth highlighting that the legal regulation of divorce in Brazil came only with Law No 6.515 of December 26, 1977, that is, a time which was very close to the beginning of current long-term couples' ties.

In this sense, the raising model a couple received, their cultural and historical influences, and especially their family references, will directly impact the way they will raise and educate their children. The conjugality of parents has a direct effect on the lives of children, in psychological terms, which can even influence the way these children will establish their marital ties in adulthood and exercise parenting (Ziviani, Féres-Carneiro, Scorsolini-Comin, & Santos, 2015). Bem and Wagner (2006) state that, in the long process that parenting is, the education of children is probably the most complex task, because the educational process is usually founded on certain values which fathers and mothers have received and

want to pass on to their children. Therefore, if these values are not in line they may cause many conflicts between the couple.

On the perception about the role of parenthood in long-term marriages, the presence of children in this context is highly valued, also representing the legitimization of a relationship. In contrast, Rios and Gomes (2009) bring the idea that today's couples construct their marital space on the grounds of alliance and sexuality and, later, think about parenthood, but not as a necessary condition, leading us to see that in contemporary times the marital role stands out in relation to the parental role.

Children oftentimes carry on the project of making the family grow and complementing their marital relationship. However, nowadays, relationships are increasingly fluid, and "I" is being much more valued than "we" (Féres-Carneiro & Magalhães, 2009). Regarding "we", we can also include the parental relationship, besides the marital one, and, in this sense, there has been a gradual transition to an increasing number of divorces and decrease in the number of children. Due to such movements, the relationship between parenthood and conjugality have been studied in the field of Family Psychology with the aim of understanding arrangements observed in contemporaneity and investigating current transformations, which strengthens the scientific research as a *locus* necessary to understand this ever-changing and reinvented scenario (Cecílio & Scorsolini-Comin, 2013).

Long-term marriages have been investigated especially concerning one's motivations to maintain these relationships over time, as well as aspects such as conflict resolution and healthcare practices (Costa & Mosmann, 2015; Landis, Peter-Wight, Martin, & Bodenmann, 2013; Norgren et al., 2004; Sandberg, Miller, Harper, Robila, & Davey, 2009). Among the reasons for the maintenance of marriage, parenthood emerges as an explanatory category not in the sense of supporting the development of children (given that children are already in adulthood), but of providing role models about what it is to be a couple, since these children are already in the transition phases to conjugality and parenthood. What is pointed out is that very little has been investigated about the perception of the role of parenthood in these long-term relationships. From this overview, the objective of this study is to understand the perception that spouses engaged in long-term marriages have about parenthood.

Method

Study type

This is an exploratory cross-sectional study of qualitative nature. It is part of a broader project that aims to understand the various facets of long-term marriages (such as conjugality, parenthood, conflict resolution strategies, personal resources) and was approved by the Ethics Research Committee of the authors' institutions of origin.

Participants

A total of 25 heterosexual couples were interviewed; they had been consensually together (civil or stable union) for at least 30 years, without having separated and without being in the process of marital separation, and had at least one child. These couples came from the hinterlands of the states of Minas Gerais and São Paulo. They had been together for 39.5 years on average (SD = 6.76), ranging between 32 and 53 years of marriage. Their average age was 64.1 years old (SD = 13.26), ranging from 51 to 82 years old. Their average number of children was three to four.

Instruments

The following instruments were employed: (a) oral life story technique, to allow an expression of memory that values the unique way of construction of the stories and experiences of each individual (Meihy & Holland, 2010); (b) semi-structured interview with each spouse and (c) semi-structured interview with the couple, to obtain information such as age, education, religion and number of children, covering topics like the transition from single to married life, construction of the couple's intimacy and strategies used for them to face challenges and difficulties; and (d) field diary, a complementary way to observe the interaction and behavior of spouses during the interviews.

Procedure

Data collection. Potential participants were contacted through the researchers' social networks. After the signing of an informed consent form the interviews began, being conducted only once with each couple. Each spouse was interviewed separately first, and then the interview was carried out with both of them, resulting in a total of three interviews per couple, making up 75 interviews. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and literally for the composition of the *corpus* of this study.

Data analysis. The analysis of the interview data developed by means of the content analysis technique (Turato, 2003). Analytical categories were built based on their recurrence in the reports of the spouses, resulting in three main thematic axes: (a) Children as synonymous with support, responsibility and learning for the couple; (b) Parenting requirements for descendants; (c) Parenting as a dimension to be admired by the partner. These axes will be described and discussed in the Results and Discussion section with the aid of the scientific literature on parenthood and long-term conjugality.

Results and Discussion

Children as synonymous with support, responsibility and learning for the couple

In this axis, the existence of children is understood as synonymous with support, responsibility and learning opportunity for the couple. These aspects are not always associated with positive movements observed in the family, but can relate to issues considered as negative in conjugality, like the desire to divorce. In this sense, children seem to represent, for some couples, a reason for them to stay together, with highlight to possible difficulties of dissolving the marital tie because of their presence. Thus, children emerge as impediments to a breakup, justifying the maintenance of the marriage, even if under circumstances in which conjugality is of low quality. The existence of children can make it difficult, as noted in the following speech, which can be understood as some mobility, represented by divorce: when a couple has children, the process of divorcing or even thinking about this detachment ends up being compromised.

Many times the children are what keep the marriage, I guess. Because if I don't have children, then I'm free, like, kind of free, we can take different ways; I guess it's easier to take different ways, in this case, if we didn't have children (Wife 01, 51 years old).

In this sample, the requirements related to child rearing can be understood as hindrances to marital experiences, as they cause the permanence of the marital relationship exclusively because of the presence of children. It should be also considered that these speeches appear more associated with women, since the concern for the home and the domestic environment of care still seems to be closely related to this gender.

At a different moment, parenthood also emerges as a phenomenon that gives meaning to existence itself. Jablonski (2010) points out that the definition of family has been transformed and that the model inherited from the 1950s, characterized by a division of roles according to which the man is the material provider and the woman is responsible for taking care of the house and children, seems to be losing its

hegemony. However, despite several changes occurring, there still are family constitutions in which this traditional division keeps defining marital relationships and roles, especially in long-term marriages.

It is also possible to see the indispensable presence of children as a sign that a marriage has been successful, as their absence would indicate the certain failure of the relationship and the impending separation of the couple. In this case, parenthood functions as that which maintains the ties of marriage. Some participants, as highlighted below, mention the existence of children not necessarily as something that would maintain marriage, but as an aspect that would protect parents from loneliness, creating a network of constant support within their homes. Children would take on thereby the role of companions:

Look, there's one thing. I can't... be alone. I'm so afraid of loneliness. So each child that came, I felt that "If this one gets married, I have the other one, if this one moves out, I have the other one", that's what I thought, you know? And now they're all gone [laughs], but we're still married, right? [laughs] So that's really rewarding, right? (Wife 08, 70 years old).

The importance attributed to the presence of children in long-term marriages is almost unanimity in the sample investigated and has a very important place in the life of the couple. In each relationship the meaning that children are given depends on their parents' expectations about parenthood. In this case, children are seen as companions or a way to prevent loneliness and, in this way, the more children one has, the more likely he/she is to not be alone and helpless so soon. Thus, parenthood has the role of constantly providing a companion to the couple. Contemporarily, the notion that parenthood is always associated unequivocally with conjugality has been questioned (Cecilio & Scorsolini-Comin, 2013). Arrangements in which the idea of being a father or mother does not appear as something necessary for the legitimation of conjugality are growing in popularity, which is clearly expressed by couples without children by choice.

Resuming the idea of Norgren et al. (2004), long-term couples, according to the literature, often have more time to spend with just the two of them because their children have left home; in some cases, the couple may not survive this departure and being closer to each other again. This may be due to the fact that parents often put many expectations on their children, including that of making them companions, which is not nurtured when it comes to the couple themselves. It is observed in these cases that parenthood is given greater importance than that of marriage itself, and promotes learning and development over time, as reported in the following excerpt:

As they say, our own children serve, so to speak, as a learning tool, right? They give life a new look because, like... you got married, so every year you have new experiences, which you didn't have before, right? Raising a child, taking them to school, taking them to the, the... the doctor, right? These are all new experiences you have... Children help us grow, as they say, responsibility, companionship, they help with all this, you know? (Husband 08, 75 years old).

As stated earlier, parenthood takes on different facets according to the experiences of each family and, in this case, the raising of children allowed great learning and new experiences for the couple. With the arrival of children, several changes occur in one's routine, in one's way to live and see the world. Actions apparently simple such as taking children to school, to the doctor or even an amusement park bring about important learning experiences. Parenthood calls parents to take a place of responsibility; after all, they will play an essential role in the lives of their children and should act so as to pass on confidence and security to them. Here we resume the idea of Bem and Wagner (2006), who claim that being a father or a mother is a very complex process that will depend heavily on family influences. Furthermore, it is important to stress that parents should be flexible and know how to manage discussions in order to reach a consensus on the best way to raise their children.

Is having a child complicated, problematic? Yes. But I'm all for it. Couples have to have children. They have to have a family. Because if it's just the couple, it seems that... it's not a family. You complete a family with children (Wife 09, 71 years old).

Although parenting requires a great amount of effort and dedication from parents, the speech above contains the idea that there is no family if there are no children; in this way, parenthood takes on a

primary role in the establishment and maintenance of conjugality. Parenthood here is the genuine dimension that forms family itself. Thus, it can be inferred that children have diverse and essential roles, mainly in long-term marriages. In this case, the family institution itself is at stake if it does not contemplate the existence of children, which is evidenced in this sample.

Back to the literature, there is an important discussion on transformations in the concept of family experienced as of the second half of the twentieth century. Different family arrangements have emerged and, thanks to both society and science, there is now a broader understanding of what a family is in fact (Féres-Carneiro & Magalhães, 2014; Alby & Vives, 2015; Zornig, 2010). The couples interviewed, for instance, are led all the time to reflect on changes observed in “today’s” families, which can be seen when they speak of their own children’s marriages and the way they coordinate their marital and parental routines.

Although couples that are childless by choice are a growing reality in the international scenario, for instance, the couples participating in this study seem to associate conjugality and parenting univocally, that is, there would be no conjugality without parenthood. The conjugal dimension would be completed by the assumption of parenthood, enabling the construction of a real family. Being a family, for the couples interviewed, would not only mean being a couple and ensuring a stable and satisfactory relationship over the years, but adding children to the domestic nucleus so they can provide various experiences for the family life. This more traditional view of family was also found in another sample of long-term couples (Costa & Mosmann, 2015), suggesting crystallized positions as to the changes in this system.

Rios and Gomes (2009) present the idea that current couples are interested in marital spaces grounded on alliance and sexuality and not necessarily on parenthood. However, it can still be seen that children are highly valued as part of marriage, and that there is a very traditionalist view of care in the relationship established with them, to the detriment of a marital life devoted to work (Cecílio & Scorsolini-Comin, 2013). This more traditional view that links marriage and parenthood can be explained in the following excerpt:

Children are the best thing we have ... Because without children you’re nothing. A childless couple is very sad... You can’t dump one and get another, you have to stay with the father of your children and live, move on (Wife 11, 57 years old).

Children, in this case, have the role of filling the parental experience, giving meaning to their parents’ lives. In addition to this dimension of search for an existential completeness, the highlighted passage underlines the importance that the wife attributes to the act of continuing marriage through children, revealing the importance of parental union to her. Thus, we can conclude that long-term couples assign parenthood the task of filling possible gaps in their relationship. Such gaps and needs could not be taken as flaws or characteristics of marriage itself, but as vicissitudes resulting from the presence of children, which would bring to the fore new challenges and learning. Thereby, we observe not an emptied conjugality, but rather one nourished by children, who would add to the conjugal universe an indispensable element for its transformation, in the transition from being a couple to being a father and mother, which would have a broader meaning in terms of life experience, as narrated by the participants.

At this point it is worth noting that the presence of children in marriages is so valued, especially by long-term couples, that the option for not having children may represent a social stigma or deviant identity, in which the person may be even interpreted as abnormal, pathological, selfish, and regarded as being failing his/her civic duty (Rios & Gomes, 2009).

Parenting requirements for descendants

As we have seen earlier, the existence of children is not always intended to fill a gap created by conjugality, in the sense of complementing a couple’s relationship. Parenthood brings with it a load of

requirements concerning affection, care and responsibility that should be handled by the couple, and may represent a source of conflict between spouses and even a situation that demands dialoguing about the best way to solve issues that arise when children are born. As stated in the literature on conjugality, parenthood summons parents to find their references about what it is to be a family, what it is to care, and about how inherited family models will be negotiated in the raising of a child (Alby & Vives, 2015; Benghozi 2010; Féres-Carneiro & Magalhães, 2014). The way a couple will educate a child, for instance, has to do with the family of origin of both spouses; these inherited models will need to be put into practice in a way that encompasses the characteristics of both parents (Ziviani et al., 2015). What happens, oftentimes, is that inherited models are not always compatible, which can lead spouses to a need to resolve this conflict, and this can be achieved through dialogue.

A child interferes with marriage: sometimes some disagreement between the couple happens because of children. Because the mother, you know how it is, the mother is always closer to the children than the father is. You know they say that there's only one mother, but fathers can be anyone, right, but there's always some interference from the child, from children with parents, to me ... I think it's in this sense. When reproaching sometimes the father does it one way and the mother picks the other side, so sometimes there's some interference in this sense. I mean, I don't have this kind of thing anymore, I don't have little children anymore, and the youngest one turned 22 yesterday, so I don't have this kind of thing anymore (Husband 02, 57 years old).

The place taken by children within a family, in addition to bringing joy, learning and accountability, can also bring some conflicts that trigger dissensions and disagreements between parents. This is due to several factors, including differences about how to educate, treat, handle or even love children. In the case above, Husband 02 feels that children can interfere with a couple's dynamics due to lack of agreement between spouses on how to reproach them; after all, this divergence may end up weakening the authority of either party and, thus, boosting conflicts.

As stated by Bem and Wagner (2006), one of the most difficult activities for a couple is to educate their children. According to Hintz and Baginski (2012), the transition to parenthood for couples expecting the first child is one of the best syntheses for the word crisis, for evidencing precisely this unique period in the life of the couple, which will require discussions and flexibility in times of decision.

So you have to have conditions for you to raise your children, a structure through which they can keep walking by themselves later on. Because children come through us, but don't belong to us. So we're giving them structure, basis, you know? So that, in the future, each one... can keep going, but with structure to continue, you know. I say: "Oh, I don't want my children to have a 32, 40-year marriage." I want them to be happy and have structure, but I want them to be an example (Husband 12, 64 years old).

The interviewees perceived that being responsible for someone takes concentrated effort, extreme dedication, consistency and love. Parenthood carries with it a load of responsibility as it involves a desire to see the other well. In the speech excerpt presented it can be noted that the parental role is within the sphere of moral example. One needs to be a model so his/her children can have structure to deal with the mishaps of life. Regarding the transmission of values related to conjugality, the interviewees did not express a desire for their children to be engaged in long-term relationships, but to be "happy", which allows us to conclude that family models can be passed on without being, however, copied (Benghozi, 2010). The marital experiences of children would not need, in this sense, to reproduce those of their parents, but should provide the satisfaction necessary, which is not always associated with the maintenance of a long-lasting relationship. Serving as an example would be more than having a successful marriage; fundamentally, it is rather a combination of values, ways of being and achieving "happiness" and personal fulfillment.

We know that, many times, today, especially because of people's economic situation, today women need to work. And I see this, many times, as a... bad thing for marriage... for the family. For the family. Because women end up having to handle these two roles, right? They end up being this professional, and end up having to come home and being the one who takes care of the house, of

the children, and all this overburdens women a lot, right? And this overburden she has, many times turns into stress (Husband 13, 52 years old).

Efforts to take good care of children often represent an essential goal for parents. They work two shifts, seek informal or complementary jobs, or combine their day jobs with other income-generating activities in order to afford the education of their children. This causes great stress for parents. In this context, it is worth highlighting the speech of a husband who sees the modernization of society, especially with women entering the labor market, as a hindrance to parenting and their own marital life. After all, women now have to handle household chores like taking care of children, the house and the husband, in addition to a parallel job away from home. One can observe from this speech by Husband 13 that there still are doubts about the need for the woman to leave home and seek their development through her experience performing roles other than those of wife and mother exclusively, which represents a crystalized stance and disregard for a whole range of women's recent achievements.

The view shown by this interviewee brings back a traditional conception of gender, associating women to the home and family domain. Thus, if there is any difficulty in this context, it is the woman's duty to know how to solve it, exempting the man from any responsibility for this universe. This movement may have different resonances, like women being blamed for the way children are raised and educated, and being assigned the task of ensuring the maintenance of their homes and marriages (Féres-Carneiro & Magalhães, 2014).

In this case, parenting is seen much more as a woman's role, which represents a deep-rooted view that women should stick to the care of their homes and children, with this being a role that cannot be assumed by men. Currently, parental roles seem more divided and women have been increasingly showing interest in taking their place in the labor market, without this necessarily representing loss to their parental roles. Men as well have been increasingly called to assume their role as fathers and husbands, not only as providers, allowing the couple to be more flexible and egalitarian in terms of rights and duties (Borsa & Nunes, 2011; Vieira et al., 2014). In this regard, it is known that nowadays there is the coexistence of more traditional families that delegate to women only the care for the house and children, and more modern families that have women not only as part of income generation but often as the only household provider (França & Schimanski, 2009).

Everyone changes, because, as the family grows you change, because when a child is born you have another responsibility, besides your wife, a child. If two are born, is another responsibility and then, as they say, everything changes, it changes indeed. If we already have responsibilities, when a child is born we have extra responsibilities, because then you have another responsibility and then you do what it takes to provide for your children. As they say, you have to go after this, go after that, so it's more and more responsibility (Husband 16, 58 years old).

When it comes down to parenting, changes occur as children require adaptations and new attitudes from parents so that care and education happen. One of the main attributes of parenting is responsibility, which should come almost as a prerequisite in this context. Over time, the needs of children oftentimes point to crooked ways that will demand a firm and responsible attitude from parents, without necessarily meaning authoritarianism. It is a caring that requires a lot of "juggling" skills.

It all changes because, as they say, I'll do it like in history, we already, when a child is born, we already have many things we already had when it was us two, from the moment a child is born it all changes, because many times you wanna go out, but you have a child, then you say: "Ah, I won't go out because I have to take care of the child", right? (Husband 16, 58 years old).

The life as a couple acquires other characteristics when a child joins the family. Needs end up changing and, with it, marriage is transformed too. The speech excerpt presented shows how the care of children can turn into a factor of concern as to the change in the couple's routine. Many times the couple will have to abstain from many pleasures and activities in order to take care of their children, which requires preparation and maturity for them to be able to go through this phase well. Parenthood here ends up intervening in conjugality. The space of conjugality should therefore be flexible to receive

the requirements that emerge with parenthood, so the couple can also be father and mother, expanding their family roles (Cecílio & Scorsolini-Comin, 2013; Féres-Carneiro & Magalhães, 2014). These responsibilities with children are very present for long-lasting couples, even in the case where their descendants are already grownups and married.

The image of the parental couple as a caregiver and example for their children resist over time, which may also be a burden for the latter, given that they may feel pressured to comply with a model created and perpetuated by their parents. Obviously, this model does not necessarily mean marital satisfaction, but the existence of a marriage that has a space for children and allows them to see good examples to follow.

Parenting as a dimension to be admired by the partner

This thematic axis refers to how spouses admire their partners for the way they exercise parenting, that is, the way they are father and mothers. Expectations around being a “good father” or a “good mother” are present in the interviewees’ speeches; proper parenting seems to be an important component for marriage maintenance precisely for evoking the other’s admiration.

Because my husband, thank God, is a great father, a great husband, a great partner, I have nothing to say... I say that if I went back in time and was a girl again and had to get married, and if I knew him, I’d marry him again. So our life is like that, with our daughters all grown up, married, with our little grandchildren, our sons-in-law, it’s a blessing, and I always say: “I ask God nothing else, I’m just thankful (Wife 14, 53 years old).

Parenting demands a lot from those in charge. The performance of this role is often something a partner admires; after all, educating is a complex task. In the previous excerpt, there is a clear admiration from a wife for her husband, who is not only a great father, according to her, but also a great partner. The “good father” attribute appears as a characteristic that is expected from a “good husband”, meaning that one could not be a good partner if parenting was not properly experienced and accepted by the spouse.

Then again we observe parenthood interfering with conjugality, now embodying a characteristic that should be expressed by the spouse, a desirable attribute for the proper performance of the spouse’s role. The parenthood experience has been increasingly investigated in the literature, starting the conception of a new father, who is more present, aware of his commitments and the emotional demands that permeate the construction of this social role (Colleti & Scorsolini-Comin, 2015; Vieira et al., 2014). Being more present in the home environment and more attentive to his children’s can also draw this man closer to the needs expressed by his wife. Being more careful with his children can lead him to a greater involvement with his wife, reason why parenting is regarded as typical of a good spouse.

The admiration for parenting also becomes manifest in the following speech excerpt in which the wife sees her husband as a great father because he expresses great affection towards their children, in addition to playing not only the role of provider and authority, but also of friend to their children: *“What I admire the most on him? It’s... the affection he has with his children... because I think... I don’t know a father who has the friendship he has with his children... it’s amazing.”* (Wife 19, 54 years old)

The parenting attribute may represent the ability the other has to care and take responsibility for his/her offspring. If the spouse performs this role well, there is a chance that the same thing will happen within the marital relationship. The opposite movement can also be true, a good partner could become a good father or a good mother.

At this point, we can consider that at the time when these couples united, that is, more than 30 years ago, the values professed within the family sphere were more directly linked to parenthood as a central element in the delimitation of the concept of family, for instance. Being a father or mother, therefore, could attest the formation of a family, even more than the exclusive exercise of conjugality could, which has been rethought in contemporary times (Zornig, 2010). Valuing the role of a good father

also meant, thereby, ensuring the possibility that this individual would become a good husband, mindful of the expectations and needs of both his offspring and wife. In a more traditional view, parenthood takes a more prominent place for marital satisfaction due to the expectation that a father who properly performs his role would tend to do the same in terms of conjugality. Such a consideration could guide the way that husbands and wives construct the attributes of the ideal partner, which is obviously based on stereotypes and social roles more commonly valued, disseminated and reinforced in our society and certain historical moments.

Final considerations

From these findings, it can be understood that parenthood plays an important role in long-term conjugality. At the same time it may be a focus of potential conflicts between the couple as a result of demands inherent to the task and of possible disagreements regarding the education and raising of children, it also represents a phenomenon perceived as an important complement in a couple's relationship. Moreover, parenthood presents itself as a requirement for long-term couples; being a father or a mother seems to be roles unequivocally associated with conjugality, and the idea that a couple can be happy without the presence of children is inconceivable.

This leads us to consider that lost-lasting conjugality, precisely for crossing a bond formed more than 30 years ago, feeds some traditional values, opening few spaces for the experimentation of new roles and possibilities to reinterpret what it is to be a family. Being a family, in the opinion of these couples, is being a couple who takes care of children; in this way, conjugality would be sustained on the complementation provided by parenthood, which makes the latter greatly responsible for the maintenance of a couple's emotional relationship. Parenthood is used as a way to justify the existence of the relationship and as a condition for the relationship to last over time.

Proper parenting ends up being understood as a desired characteristic for the choice of a partner and the continuation of the relationship, as among the characteristics of a good spouse there is an implicit representation of a "good father" or a "good mother". Said representations reflect the interviewees' experience and span the way that the discourses on marriage are articulated. This consideration points to a need for further studies that address the relationship between conjugality and parenthood. There is still not enough evidence that allows us to point differences or similarities between long-term couples and couples engaged in newer relationships concerning specifically how parenthood is expressed in conjugality, which can be covered in future studies. What can be concluded from this study is that long-term couples associate marriage unequivocally with parenthood and emphasize the need they feel to be good examples for their children, not only when it comes to how a marriage should be, but also in terms of life experiences that cross the way children are raised and educated.

At the end of this comprehensive course, it can be pointed out that this study brings advances in the knowledge already produced, for composing a qualitative research with a robust sample, which poses several difficulties, including the result systematization ability. This attempt to conduct a broader study, keeping the characteristic of a qualitative design, may have obscured some peculiarities of the speeches brought by the couples. Another limitation is the fact that the participants were from only two states in the Brazilian southeast region, disregarding the possibility of a fruitful dialogue with different realities and sociodemographic characteristics. As a contribution to forthcoming studies, it is worth highlighting the consideration that parenthood seems to be a powerful variable in the sense of continuously building conjugality over time. Parenthood comes with challenges, responsibilities and conflicts, which are assumed by the couple as a shared task, weakening marital ties in some cases, but also strengthening positive images associated with spouses who are fathers and mothers as well.

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