Parents-to-be with Overly Optimistic Expectations of Parenthood: Who Are They and What Should Counsellors Do?

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ABSTRACT

A fair number of parents-to-be expect parenthood to be the impetus for improving their couple relationship, but this expectation is likely to be disconfirmed for most of them. With a focus on childrearing attitudes, the author investigates the factors differentiating parents-to-be who have overly optimistic expectations about parenthood from those who have realistic expectations. A sample of 174 French-Canadian couples expecting their first child completed questionnaires during the last trimester of pregnancy. Results indicated that, compared to realistic parents-to-be, those with overly optimistic expectations show less complexity in their attitudes toward childrearing. Implications of these findings for counsellors are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

De nombreux futurs parents espèrent que l'arrivée de leur enfant puisse améliorer leur relation conjugale, mais pour la plupart d'entre eux, la réalité ne sera pas conforme à cette attente. L'auteur a investigué les facteurs qui différencient les futurs parents qui ont des attentes trop optimistes concernant la parentalité de ceux qui ont des attentes réalistes, en portant une attention particulière aux attitudes face à l'éducation des enfants. Un échantillon de 174 couples canadiens-français attendant leur premier enfant ont remplis des questionnaires lors du troisième trimestre de la grossesse. Les résultats indiquent que, comparativement aux futurs parents ayant des attentes réalistes, ceux ayant des attentes trop optimistes démontrent moins de complexité dans leurs attitudes face à l'éducation des enfants. Les implications de ces résultats pour les praticiens en counseling sont discutées.

Previous research has found that parenting is a valued and desired role for many individuals (Langdridge, Connolly, & Sheran, 2000). Approximately 90% of contemporary married couples will choose to form a family by having at least one child (Cowan & Cowan, 1995; Statistics Canada, 2002). Results reveal that a number of future parents are fairly realistic about how parenthood will influence several aspects of their lives (Harwood, McLean, & Durkin, 2007; Lawrence, Nylen, & Cobb, 2007; Sevón, 2005). Many future parents, however, have overly optimistic and unrealistic expectations about parenthood (Feldman & Nash, 1984; Green & Kafetsios, 1997; Miller, 2007; O'Laughlin & Anderson, 2001).

Social cognition theorists suggest that prenatal expectations and the degree to which those expectations are confirmed or disconfirmed likely play important roles in predicting adjustment to parenthood (Kalmuss, Davidson, & Cushman, 1992; Lawrence et al., 2007). Numerous researchers have found that unmet or violated parenting expectations, particularly among women, are associated with increased

depressive symptomatology after the birth (Bielawska-Batorowick & Kossakowska-Petrycka, 2006; Harwood et al., 2007), decreased marital satisfaction after the birth (Hackel & Ruble, 1992; Harwood et al.; Lawrence et al.), and a more difficult transition to parenthood (Coleman, Nelson, & Sundre, 1999; Delmore-Ko, Pancer, Hunsberger, & Pratt, 2000). These results are particularly important in light of recent findings revealing that marital dissatisfaction and depressive symptoms after childbirth are associated with a higher likelihood of divorce (Salmela-Aro, Aunola, Saisto, Halmesmäki, & Nurmi, 2006). Taken as a whole, these results suggest that the effect of having overly optimistic expectations disconfirmed in a negative direction is not innocuous and reflect the negative impact of unrealistic optimism in the face of challenging circumstances (Harwood et al.; but see also Jackson, Pancer, Pratt, & Hunsberger, 2000, for another point of view).

The most robust effect of the transition to parenthood is the decline in couples' relationship adjustment following childbirth (Bouchard, Boudreau, & Hébert, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2007; Porter & Hsu, 2003; Schulz, Cowan, & Cowan, 2006). In spite of this well-documented effect, one of the areas in which future parents are especially likely to display unrealistic expectations is with respect to how parenthood will affect the couple relationship; the negative impact of childbirth on the couple relationship is often an unanticipated outcome of parenthood (Belsky, 1985; Kalmuss et al., 1992; O'Laughlin & Anderson, 2001). Simply put, the belief that parenthood may be the impetus for improving one's relationship with one's partner is shared by a fair number of parents-to-be, particularly men, and is likely to be disconfirmed for most of them (McNulty & Karney, 2004; O'Laughlin & Anderson).

There has been little work conducted to determine the factors that influence prenatal expectations, including those related to the couple relationship (Coleman et al., 1999; Diener, Goldstein, & Mangelsdorf, 1995; McNulty & Karney, 2004), a surprising observation given the empirical evidence showing the negative impact of overly optimistic expectations on postpartum levels of depression and marital satisfaction (e.g., Harwood et al., 2007; Lawrence et al., 2007). According to Jackson and his co-authors (2000), as well as McNulty and Karney, unrealistically optimistic expectations probably do partially reflect enduring individual differences. Recent findings reaffirming the central aspect of childrearing attitudes in family dynamics (Gaertner, Spinrad, Eisenberg, & Greving, 2007) suggest that the study of parental attitudes toward childrearing (Eagly, 1992; Holden, 1995) could provide one of the most promising starting points for understanding unrealistic prenatal expectations. An attitude can be defined as a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour (Bor, Brennan, Williams, Najman, & O'Callaghan, 2003; Eagly).

Prior work with expectant parents directed my attention to the considerable variation in the integrative complexity of thinking in individuals making the transition to parenthood (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Gallant, 2000). I reasoned that parents-to-be with unrealistic expectations of parenthood are those who view childrearing in a simplistic way. More precisely, they would be more likely to

adhere to parental attitudes that describe childrearing in one-dimensional, black-and-white terms from a single perspective.

With a focus on how these couples differ on parental attitudes toward childrearing, the current study expanded on prior work to explore the factors that differentiate parents-to-be who have unrealistically optimistic prenatal expectations regarding the impact of parenthood on the couple relationship from those who have realistic expectations. On the basis of past literature on parental attitudes and prenatal expectations as reviewed above (e.g., Bor et al., 2003; Daggett, O'Brien, Zanolli, & Peyton, 2000; Gaertner et al., 2007; Pancer et al., 2000), it is expected that, in comparison with parents-to-be with realistic prenatal expectations, those with overly optimistic expectations would show less complexity in their attitudes toward childrearing (i.e., they would adhere more to authoritarian attitudes, less to democratic attitudes, and less to attitudes acknowledging the exhausting aspect of parenthood). Demographic factors, pregnancy factors, and relationship adjustment were selected as potential covariates, as these factors have been reported to be associated with prenatal expectations or a related construct (Harwood et al., 2007; Pajulo, Helenius, & Mayes, 2006).

METHOD

Participants

The current study relied on a sample of 174 French-Canadian adult couples, all expecting their first child. Partners had been living together an average of 5 years (*SD* = 2.7) and were either simply cohabiting (34%) or legally married (66%). The women averaged 28.6 years of age (*SD* = 3.7), whereas the men averaged 29.9 years of age (*SD* = 4.0). The average level of education was 16.7 years for women (*SD* = 2.4) and 15.7 years for men (*SD* = 2.7). The median personal annual income for women and men was around $45,000. Most pregnancies (85%) were planned.

Procedure

Most participants were recruited from prenatal classes offered by regional hospitals. In these prenatal classes, couples participate in meetings that include exercises, guidance, and a visit to the birthing unit of the hospital. Prenatal classes are a very common practice in Canada, and almost the entire population of couples expecting their first child attends these classes. A small number of couples (*n* = 16) were also recruited by word of mouth.

Interested couples were invited to complete a series of questionnaires. The majority of couples (*n* = 136 couples; 78%) were seen in laboratory settings. The other couples, that is, those who lived too far away or whose schedules made it hard for them to come to the laboratory, received the questionnaires by mail. These couples received instructions by telephone and were invited to communicate with the researchers if questions arose. Multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) on demographic variables revealed that no significant differences existed on length of relationship, age, education level, and annual income between those who com-

pleted the questionnaires in laboratory and those who completed them at home at $\alpha = .05$, $F(4, 167) = 2.04$, $p = .09$ for women and $F(4, 167) = 1.29$, $p = .28$ for men. In addition, these two groups did not differ on marital status (married vs. cohabiting), $\chi^2(1, N = 174) = .19$, $p = .70$.

Each partner completed measures of prenatal expectations, attitudes toward childrearing, relationship adjustment, and a demographic questionnaire. Only the French versions of the questionnaires were used. In return for their participation, couples were paid $25. In addition, participants received a written summary of their answers to the questionnaires. To ensure confidentiality, participants received information only about themselves and not about their partners.

In accordance with previous research dealing with prenatal expectations (e.g., Coleman et al., 1999; Delmore-Ko et al., 2000; Lawrence et al., 2007; Pancer et al., 2000), the questionnaires were completed during the third trimester of pregnancy ($M = 32.4$ weeks of gestation, $SD = 3.3$). This strategy has the advantage of eliminating variations in prenatal expectations that may arise across pregnancy trimesters.

Instruments

A demographic questionnaire asked participants to report their age, marital status, length of relationship, education level, and annual income. This questionnaire also contained an item to measure a central aspect of any pregnancy: its planned or unplanned nature ("Was your pregnancy or your partner's pregnancy a planned event?").

The instrument measuring prenatal expectations as to the impact of parenthood on the couple relationship was developed for the purposes of the study from the work of Pancer et al. (2000). Pancer et al. asked future parents to answer the following question in a prenatal interview: "How do you think your relationship as a couple will change after the baby has arrived?" The authors reported three typical responses to this question: (a) Becoming a parent is going to be the best thing that could happen to us as a couple; (b) It's going to be really exciting relating to a new person, but it's also going to affect our life as a couple; and (c) We're going to have to try to balance the time we devote to the baby with the time we devote to each other as a couple. The instrument developed for the current study asked participants to choose, from the three previous responses reported by Pancer et al., the one that best represented the way they thought their relationship as a couple would change after the birth of their child. Thus, the measure is based on a single question with three particular response categories (see Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991, for a discussion of the usefulness of single-item measures).

Parent expectations were assessed separately for each parent. I labelled a parent expectation as (a) *unrealistic and overly optimistic* if the parent-to-be chose the response, "Becoming a parent is going to be the best thing that could happen to us as a couple"; (b) *in between* if the parent-to-be chose the response, "It's going to be really exciting relating to a new person, but it's also going to affect our life as a couple"; and (c) *realistic* if the parent-to-be chose the response, "We're going

to have to try to balance the time we devote to the baby with the time we devote to each other as a couple." These three labels reflect the intent expressed in Pancer et al. (2000) regarding parental expectations. Pancer et al. demonstrated the predictive validity of these prenatal expectations: Women with realistic expectations demonstrated better adjustment after their babies were born than did women with unrealistic expectations.

The *Parental Attitude Research Instrument* (PARI) (Schaefer & Bell, 1958; Stanton & Silva, 1992; Zuckerman, Ribback, Monashkin, & Norton, 1958) assesses parental attitudes toward general parenting and consists of 23 five-item scales. These items are general opinions with which the participant is asked to strongly or mildly agree or disagree on a 4-point scale. Results of many exploratory factor analyses (de Man, Balkou, & Vobecky, 1985; Stanton & Silva; Zuckerman et al.) of the 23 subscales revealed the same factorial structure in three higher-order factors: (a) authoritarian attitudes, which encompass 17 subscales (such as strictness: "Most children should have more discipline than they get"); (b) democratic attitudes, which encompass three subscales (such as encouraging verbalization: "A child has a right to his own point of view and ought to be allowed to express it"); and (c) attitudes acknowledging the exhausting aspect of parenthood, which encompass three scales (such as irritability: "Children will get on any woman's nerves if she has to be with them all day"). These three higher-order factors were used in the current study to measure parental attitudes. Higher scores reflect higher adherence to each parental attitude.

In addition to demonstrating good factorial properties, PARI shows adequate concurrent validity with, for instance, measures of general mental ability (r = -.42, p < .01 for authoritarian control; r = .24, p < .01 for democratic attitudes) and training in child development (r = -.32, p < .01 for authoritarian control; r = .12, p < .01 for democratic attitudes; r = -.09, p < .01 for attitudes acknowledging the exhausting aspect of parenthood; Stanton & Silva, 1992). The measure also demonstrates good predictive validity: Mothers with a high number of adversities reported higher scores on authoritarian attitudes. The scores in the current sample for the three subscales were normally distributed for both women (z scores assessing skewness ranged from .23 to -1.46, p > .05) and men (z scores assessing skewness ranged from .67 to -1.46, p > .05). In the current study, Cronbach's alphas for women were .91 for authoritarian attitudes, .65 for democratic attitudes, and .75 for attitudes acknowledging the exhausting aspect of parenthood. Alphas for men were, respectively, .91, .72, and .74.

The *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* (Spanier, 1976) is a 32-item questionnaire that assesses relationship adjustment (e.g., "How often do you and your partner quarrel?"). It is designed for use with either married or cohabiting couples (Spanier). A global score, ranging from 0 to 151, is calculated, with higher scores representing higher levels of dyadic adjustment. The instrument also provides four subscale scores for dyadic consensus, dyadic satisfaction, dyadic cohesion, and expression of affection. In the current study, the global score served as the index of dyadic adjustment. The questionnaire features high scale reliability (Cronbach's alpha =

.96). It also demonstrates high predictive validity because it allows for discrimination between married and divorced couples (Spanier). Cronbach's alphas were .89 for both men and women in the current sample.

RESULTS

The data analyses, including those reported in the method section (such as the alphas), were computed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 15.0 for Windows. Unless otherwise specified, the alpha level was fixed at .05. Of the 174 women who participated in the study, 46 (26.4%) had overly optimistic and unrealistic prenatal expectations ("Becoming a parent is going to be the best thing that could happen to us as a couple"), 96 (55.2%) had realistic expectations ("We're going to have to try to balance the time we devote to the baby with the time we devote to each other as a couple"), and 32 (18.4%) had expectations that were in between ("It's going to be really exciting relating to a new person, but it's also going to affect our life as a couple"). Of the 174 men who participated in the study, 77 (44.3%) had overly optimistic and unrealistic expectations, 69 (39.7%) had realistic expectations, and 28 (16.1%) had expectations that were in between. Due to the small number, the subjects reporting intermediate prenatal expectations ("It's going to be really exciting relating to a new person, but it's also going to affect our life as a couple") were combined with those having realistic expectations for the analyses, yielding two groups: the unrealistic prenatal expectations group (46 women and 77 men) and the realistic prenatal expectations group (128 women and 97 men). This having been said, omitting subjects having intermediate prenatal expectations or combining them with subjects having unrealistic expectations rather than realistic expectations did not modify the pattern of results.

Preliminary Analyses

The preliminary analyses were intended to examine differences in demographic factors, pregnancy factors, and relationship adjustment between parents-to-be with realistic expectations and those with unrealistic expectations. Taken as a whole, these analyses were used to identify the variables that should be selected as covariates in the primary analyses, which were focused on parental attitudes. Differences between individuals with unrealistic expectations and realistic expectations regarding demographic and pregnancy factors were examined using chi-square analyses and MANOVAs, followed by descriptive discriminant analyses (Thomas & Zumbo, 1996). Chi-square analyses were used for dichotomous variables (gender, marital status, and intendedness of pregnancy), whereas MANOVAs were used for continuous variables (age, length of union, education, and annual income). The aim of chi-square analyses was to evaluate if prenatal expectations were dependent of gender, marital status, or intendedness of pregnancy. The aim of MANOVAs was to examine if individuals with different prenatal expectations (the independent variable) differed on their age, length of union, education, or annual income (the dependent variables). Differences in relationship adjustment

between parents-to-be who had realistic expectations and those who had unrealistic expectations were also examined using *t* tests for independent samples.

Results of chi-square analyses revealed that more men than women had unrealistic expectations, χ^2 (1, N = 174) = 12.08, $p < .001$. However, prenatal expectations (realistic vs. unrealistic) were not related to marital status (married vs. cohabiting), for either men, χ^2 (1, N = 174) = 2.49, $p = .12$, or women, χ^2 (1, N = 174) = .76, $p = .38$. Prenatal expectations were also independent of the intendedness of pregnancy (planned vs. unplanned) for men, χ^2 (1, N = 174) = .71, $p = .40$, and women, χ^2 (1, N = 174) = 2.27, $p = .13$.

MANOVAs, which adjusted for unequal sample sizes between groups using the Type III sum of squares (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), were then performed. Results revealed that women with unrealistic expectations differed from women with realistic expectations on demographic variables, F (4, 168) = 2.98, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .07$. However, demographic variables did not distinguish between men who had realistic expectations and men who had unrealistic expectations, F (4, 168) = 2.00, $p = .10$.

Descriptive discriminant analyses were run on women's data. An inspection of the structure matrix and of standardized canonical discriminant function coefficients revealed that women's education level was more important to discrimination among groups. These results were mirrored by univariate *F*s, which were tested with alphas set at .0125 (.05/number of predictors) to keep the overall alpha level below .05 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Only the level of education reached the threshold of significance. Compared to those with realistic expectations, women with unrealistic expectations had lower levels of education (M = 16.98 vs. 15.83 years of education), F (1, 171) = 8.27, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .05$.

Finally, women with unrealistic expectations reported higher levels of relationship adjustment (M = 127.79, SD = 11.11) than did women with realistic expectations (M = 124.01, SD = 9.51), t (172) = 2.21, $p < .05$. Men with unrealistic expectations report, for their part, similar levels of relationship adjustment (M = 123.96, SD = 11.58) as men with realistic expectations (M = 121.06, SD = 12.23), t (172) = 1.59, $p = .12$.

Primary Analyses

The means and standard deviations for the three parental attitudes toward childrearing are provided in Table 1, grouped according to prenatal expectations for both men and women.

Differences in parental attitudes between parents-to-be with realistic expectations and those with unrealistic expectations were analyzed using multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVAs), followed by univariate analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs). These analyses were adjusted for unequal sample sizes between groups with the Type III sum of squares (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). In these analyses, prenatal expectations (realistic vs. unrealistic) served as the independent variable, while authoritarian attitudes, democratic attitudes, and attitudes acknowledging the exhausting aspects of parenthood served as dependent vari-

ables. Demographic and pregnancy factors that differed between parents-to-be with realistic and unrealistic expectations in the preliminary analyses were used as covariates. Relationship adjustment was used as an additional covariate for both future mothers and fathers, given that this study was focused on prenatal expectations of the impact of parenthood on the couple relationship. To keep the overall alpha below .05, the alpha level was set at .017 for ANCOVAs (i.e., .05/number of tests; Tabachnick & Fidell).

Table 1
Raw Means and Standard Deviations on Child Rearing Attitudes for Women and Men with Realistic and Unrealistic Expectations

Measure		Women		Men	
		Realistic expectations $n = 128$	Unrealistic expectations $n = 46$	Realistic expectations $n = 97$	Unrealistic expectations $n = 77$
Authoritarian attitudes	*M*	194.33	196.27	203.44	212.30
	SD	22.21	23.58	31.42	23.56
Democratic attitudes	*M*	49.70	48.87	49.01	49.40
	SD	4.15	4.13	4.77	4.12
Exhausting attitudes	*M*	37.96	35.07	39.11	38.25
	SD	5.91	5.54	5.67	5.79

For women, the MANCOVA, with education level and relationship adjustment as covariates, showed significant differences between the two groups (realistic vs. unrealistic) on parental attitudes, $F(3, 168) = 3.20$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .05$. More specifically, results of ANCOVAs revealed that, in comparison with women with realistic prenatal expectations, those with unrealistic expectations adhered less to parental attitudes that acknowledged the exhausting aspect of parenthood, $F(1, 170) = 8.30$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Women's level of education, $F(3, 168) = 9.88$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .15$, and relationship adjustment, $F(3, 168) = 5.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$, were significant covariates.

For men, the MANCOVA, with relationship adjustment as a covariate, revealed significant differences between the two groups (realistic vs. unrealistic) on parental attitudes, $F(3, 169) = 2.97$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Results of ANCOVAs revealed that, in comparison with men with realistic prenatal expectations, those with unrealistic expectations adhered more to authoritarian attitudes, $F(1, 171) = 6.73$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .04$. Relationship adjustment was also a significant covariate, $F(3, 169) = 11.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .17$.

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis that future parents who have overly optimistic prenatal expectations about the influence of parenthood on their couple relationship would show less complexity in their attitudes toward childrearing was supported by the data.

Two parental attitudes distinguish between the two groups of parents-to-be: authoritarian attitudes and attitudes acknowledging the exhausting aspect of parenthood. Men with unrealistic prenatal expectations tended to be more authoritarian in their expressed attitudes about childrearing and family life. Women with unrealistic prenatal expectations were, for their part, less prone to recognizing the exhausting aspects of motherhood. No significant differences were observed on democratic attitudes: on average, parents-to-be reported high adherence to democratic attitudes. The benefits of democratic parenting on child development are largely recognized (e.g., Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994).

In summary, women who believe that becoming a parent would have only positive effects on their couple relationship have a positive, but too simplistic, vision of childrearing. More precisely, many women with overly optimistic expectations were unable to fully grasp the tremendous, and sometimes overwhelming, nature of childrearing. This result could be explained in part by the low level of integrative complexity of thinking of these women. Their potentially high levels of dispositional optimism could also be an explanatory factor. Similarly, expectant fathers who believe that becoming a parent would have only positive effects on their couple relationship also have simpler childrearing attitudes. For instance, they were more likely to adhere to parental attitudes that value strict, unquestioning obedience from children. Our results suggest that individuals with overly optimistic prenatal expectations may not only be more at risk of showing depressive symptomatology and marital dissatisfaction after the birth because of the possible discrepancy between their prenatal expectations and postnatal reality (Harwood et al., 2007; Lawrence et al., 2007), but also be more at risk of having less generally approved attitudes toward childrearing. In fact, although in a significant number of cases the children of authoritarian parents develop quite successfully, they are more at risk of showing dependency, hostility, and low self-control (e.g., Darling & Steinberg, 1993).

Findings also indicate that women with realistic expectations were more educated (see Coleman et al., 1999, for similar results). Furthermore, results indicated that men and women who were the most happy in their relationships also had the most optimistic expectations of parenthood (see Harwood et al., 2007, for similar results). Differences on childrearing attitudes emerged after accounting for the significant influence of individuals' levels of education and relationship adjustment, thus supporting the claim that expectations are not simply a measure of adjustment or general knowledge, but rather reflect a separate component of parental characteristics (Diener et al., 1995).

Men and women had different expectations about the transition to parenthood. Although most parents-to-be had realistic expectations about how parenthood would influence their couple relationship (see Harwood et al., 2007, for similar results), more men than women had unrealistic expectations. As previous research has found (O'Laughlin & Anderson, 2001), women estimated the costs of parenthood to be higher than did male respondents, probably because women often bear a greater share of childcare responsibilities than do men.

According to Cohen's (1988) guidelines, an eta-squared of .01 refers to a small effect size, whereas an eta-squared of .09 refers to a medium effect size. In keeping with these guidelines, the effect sizes reported in the current study were mostly medium, with a few falling between small and medium and a few being larger than medium. It is worth noting that these effect sizes were expected, given that clinical psychology tends to have smaller effects than those found, for instance, in physiological psychology (see, e.g., Bögels, Bamelis, & van der Bruggen, 2008, for similar effect sizes; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Limitations of the Study

Some limitations of the current study are now noted. First, the effect sizes observed in the current study suggest that other variables, such as the level of dispositional optimism, could also differentiate parents-to-be who have overly optimistic expectations about parenthood from those who have more realistic expectations. Second, the use of questionnaires for all measures raises the issue of common method variance. Future studies could benefit from the inclusion of multiple methods of assessment. Third, because the focus of the current study was on average trends, the variability within each group (i.e., the realistic prenatal expectations group and the unrealistic prenatal expectations group) was not investigated. Future studies should investigate individual differences within each group in order to provide a more complete picture of prenatal expectations about parenthood. Fourth, no claim is made that the parents-to-be from the convenience samples used in this study are representative of the population of couples expecting their first child.

Finally, it can be argued that categorizing parental expectations into three categories on the basis of one question is inappropriate and potentially invalid. From a formal psychometric scaling perspective, single-item measures, such as the one used to measure prenatal expectations, may show less validity than multiple-items measures. However, no multiple-item measure of prenatal expectations is currently available.

Implications for Prenatal Education and Counselling

The current findings have implications for education and counselling interventions provided to couples who are expecting their first child. Currently, the focus in childbirth preparation classes is largely on the physiological event of labour and delivery, and, unfortunately, many prenatal programs fail to incorporate discussions of the social and emotional changes and stressors that new parents often experience (Coleman et al., 1999; Harwood et al., 2007; Lawrence et al., 2007). Following empirical results that reveal the negative effects of overly optimistic prenatal expectations on postpartum experience, it has been suggested that expectant parents be given anticipatory guidance to facilitate the development of realistic expectations (e.g., Coleman et al.; Lawrence et al.; O'Laughlin & Anderson, 2001). However, truly effective interventions geared toward changing expectations are difficult to implement without an understanding of how prenatal expectations

develop (Coleman et al.). The current results suggest that interventions provided to expectant parents should be aimed at developing complex expectations of parenthood as well as complex childrearing attitudes.

The perinatal period is a time of enormous psychological change. This makes it an especially important and difficult, albeit potentially fruitful, period from an interventional point of view (Pajulo et al., 2006). The third trimester of pregnancy is perhaps the ideal time to educate and counsel couples, as this is the point at which parental attitudes are typically in the formative stage and have not yet crystallized (Coleman et al., 1999). Furthermore, couples at this stage of the transition to parenthood are highly receptive to the attitudes and behaviours of models (Coleman et al.). The message that counsellors could convey to expectant parents is the following: For most new parents, parenthood will be associated with a modest but significant decline in relationship adjustment (Bouchard et al., 2006). In this context, individuals with overly optimistic expectations about the impact of parenthood on the couple relationship are at risk of being disappointed by their experience (Lawrence et al., 2007). Parents-to-be who demonstrate realistic expectations of parenthood show high levels of complexity in their attitudes toward childrearing. For instance, they believe that parents should be relatively strict but receptive to disagreement from their children, and they are generally aware that the arrival of a first child alters virtually every aspect of life, in positive and, sometimes, negative ways.

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