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**THE COUPLE RELATIONSHIP ACROSS THE TRANSITION TO  
PARENTHOOD**

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***Abstract***

Our research was aimed at studying the dynamics of marriage satisfaction in a spousal relationship before and after the child's birth. The research had two stages: 1 stage – married couples were recruited during 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> trimester of pregnancy; 2 stage: the same couples were studied at 6-9 months after their child's birth. Our sample consisted of 220 people (110 couples, officially married or living in a common-law marriage). The study had been conducted in Saint-Petersburg, Russia (80 people, 40 couples) and in Cherepovetz, Russia (140 people, 70 couples). To study the marital relationships on both stages we used Marriage Satisfaction Questionnaire by Stolin, Romanova, Butenko – for the Cherepovetz sample, and Marriage Satisfaction Questionnaire by Alieshina, Gozman, Dubovskaya – for the Saint-Petersburg sample; for both samples we also used projective drawing “My family”. The research has shown that the dynamics of marital relations across the transition to parenthood depends on gender and territorial factors: marital satisfaction deteriorate in women, and for men, marital satisfaction is reduced only in metropolitan residents. The level of marriage satisfaction and viewing family relationships as conflictual before the child's birth is the predictor of the level of marriage satisfaction and viewing relationships as conflictual in both groups of men and women from metropolis, but not for women from a smaller city. Initial level of marital relations affects its decline across the transition to parenthood/

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**Keywords:** Couple relationship, transition to parenthood, marital satisfaction



## 1. Introduction

Marriage satisfaction is one of the most important components of an adult's life satisfaction, mental health and psychological well-being. At the same time the spousal relationship is in turn can be considered as the most important factor for the child's psychological well-being. Almost for any family the child's birth is considered to be one of the most outstanding event, at the same time it is seen as normal family crisis that the family goes through (Oliferovich, Zinkevich-Kuzemkina, & Velenta, 2006). This crisis is noted by many researchers and practitioners, and it is observed that with the child's birth the number of family conflicts and even divorces drastically increases. The reasons for such crisis are multiple but they can be grouped into three: physiological, psychological, and economic. Physiological factors include fatigue due to the care for the small child that often leads to the lack of sleep, sometimes families go through difficulties in breast feeding. Economic factors often include the decrease in family income because one parent stops working, and the child care requires an additional cost. The third group of factors – psychological – includes multiple aspects, i.e. change in family routines and roles, need to acquire parenting skills, lack of personal free time and time for the couple to be together (Savenysheva, 2016). Stresses and fatigue deteriorate adult's self regulation abilities and general physiological and psychological resources which in turn may lead to less constructive behavior in conflicts (Kluwer & Johnson, 2007). So, the research on the dynamics of marriage satisfaction in spousal relationships and factors that are influencing it has its practical importance.

The issue of transition to parenthood is being widely studied for the last several decades by international researchers. But there are no longitudinal studies in Russian scientific research literature on the dynamics of spousal relationships in transition to parenthood. We see our study being important with regards to this.

The review of the international literature of longitudinal studies on the dynamics of spousal relationships in transition to parenthood (Savenysheva, 2016) has shown that after the child's birth there is a small but significant decrease in spousal relationships satisfaction (Belsky, Lang, & Huston, 1986; Belsky, Rovine, 1990; Clements & Markman, 1996; Collins, Dunkel-Schetter, Lobel, & Scrinshaw, 1993; Cox, Paley, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999; Cowan et al., 1985; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Gottman, Driver, & Tabares, 2002; Grote & Clark, 2001; O'Brien & Peyton, 2002; Rhoades, Simpson, Campbell, & Grich, 2001; Kluwer & Johnson, 2007; Wallace & Gotlib 1990).

The fact that in families with no children there is also usually a decrease in relationship satisfaction with time had lead to the need to differentiate the influence of marriage length and child's birth on the dynamics of spousal relationships satisfaction. In order to do this another research approach had been used, i.e. comparative study of dynamics of marriage satisfaction in couples with and without children.

Such approach had shown that both couples with and without children demonstrate the decrease in the quality of their spousal relationships. But most of the research shows that couples with children have greater decrease in their relationships than couples without children. (Cowan et al., 1985; Cowan & Cowan, 1995; Crohan, 1996; Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Dew & Wilcox, 2011; Keizer & Schenk, 2012; Kurdek, 1993; Lawrence, Rothman, Cobb, Rothman, & Bradbury, 2008; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrère, 2000; and others). Mitnick, Heyman, and Smith-Slep (2009) in their meta-analysis have demonstrated the significant decrease in relationship satisfaction from the pregnancy to the end of the first

year of child's life in 16 longitudinal studies, but in 4 longitudinal studies of marital satisfaction from the date of marriage till transition to parenthood there were no significant differences in its dynamic between couples with and without children.

In general, it should be said that there is a decrease in marital satisfaction and quality of spousal relationships both in couples with and without children, but there is a greater decrease in couples with children. The great data variance shows inhomogeneity of these changes in relationships, and quality analysis shows that not all the couples demonstrate the decrease in spousal relationships satisfaction after the child's birth. For instance, the studies done by Belsky, Kelly and Rovin, and Doss have demonstrated that about one third of couples did not have the decrease in their relationships satisfaction after the child's birth, and even felt their relationships got better (Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Doss et al., 2009).

This leads us to studying factors having impact on the dynamics of spousal relationships across the transition to parenthood. The analysis on international research studying factors influencing the dynamics of marriage satisfaction (Savenysheva, 2017) had shown that there are inconsistent results about the influence of the parent gender, still the greater decrease is often observed in women. Such factors as parent age, length of marriage, and SES at their extremes have greater negative impact on marital satisfaction. There was also found negative impact of such personal characteristics as depression, low self-esteem, low sensitivity, ambivalent attachment in spouses, as well as egalitarian stereotypes/attitudes in women on spousal relationship satisfaction. The study of the influence of spousal relationships before child's birth on the couple relationships after the birth has shown that if a couple had problems in their relationships before their child's birth, these become more evident after the child's birth. Such relationships often have low spousal congruence and support, frequent conflicts, are low in positive communication, and high in negativity. After the child's birth the great importance is of time spent together by spouses, and the even distribution of household duties. The initial level of marriage satisfaction is another great factor on the dynamics of marriage satisfaction across the transition to parenthood. As the majority of authors note that the greater level of marriage satisfaction spouses have before the child's birth the greater decrease in it is observed after the birth of a child (Savenysheva, 2017).

## **2. Problem Statement**

The period of transition to parenthood is considered as one of the striking "normative" family crises. The review of the international literature of longitudinal studies on the dynamics of spousal relationships in transition to parenthood (Savenysheva, 2016) has shown that there is a decrease in marital satisfaction and quality of spousal relationships both in couples with and without children, but there is a greater decrease in couples with children. However, there isn't Russian research of the marital relations across the transition to parenthood. There are great number of factors influencing the dynamics of marriage satisfaction. In our study we decided to focus on gender differences in marriage satisfaction and the role of the initial level of marriage satisfaction (during pregnancy).

### 3. Research Questions

After the childbirth there is a significant decrease in the marital satisfaction; the dynamics of marital relations depends on gender, initial level of couple relation and the territorial factor.

### 4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of our research is to study the dynamics of couple relationship across the transition to parenthood and factors affecting it.

### 5. Research Methods

**Design.** The research had the longitudinal design and two stages: 1 stage – married couple were recruited during 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> trimester of pregnancy; 2 stage: the same couples were studied at 6-9 months after child's birth.

**Sample.** Our sample consisted of 220 people (110 couples): 110 men age 22-38 years, 110 women age 19-35 years, all officially married or living in a common-law marriage. The study had been conducted in Saint-Petersburg, Russia (80 people, 40 couples) and in Cherepovetz, Russia (140 people, 70 couples).

**Measures.** To study the marital relationships on both stages we used Marriage Satisfaction Questionnaire by Stolin, Romanova, Butenko – for the Cherepovetz sample, and Marriage Satisfaction Questionnaire by Alieshina, Gozman, Dubovskaya – for the Saint-Petersburg sample; for both samples we used projective drawing “My family” (Venger., 2003); socio-demographic information has been also gathered.

**Data analysis:** means comparison, frequencies analysis, Student's t-criteria for independent and paired samples; Mann-Whitney U-test for independent samples, Wilcoxon non-parametric criteria for paired samples, correlational and regression analyses.

### 6. Findings

The analysis of the dynamics of the relationships with the spouse in men from Saint-Petersburg has shown a significant decrease of marital satisfaction ( $p < 0.001$ ), the increase of emotional distance with wife after the birth of a child ( $p < 0.05$ ), and insignificant increase in viewing relationships in a family as conflict (Table 1 and 2). The frequency analysis has shown that for 72.5% of men the marital satisfaction has decreased, for 12.5% - increased, and for 15% has not changed.

**Table 1.** Prebirth (Time 1) to Postbirth (Time 2) Mean Changes on Marital Satisfaction

	Mean Pregnancy	Mean 6-9 months after birth	Mean Dynamics	p
Women (Saint-Petersburg)	37,108	35,649	-1,459	0,057
Women (Cherepovets)	33,229	30,986	-2,243	0,015
Men (Saint-Petersburg)	38,345	34,724	-3,621	0,001
Men (Cherepovets)	31,843	32,400	,557	0,540

**Table 2.** Prebirth (Time 1) to Postbirth (Time 2) Mean Changes on Marital Conflict

	Mean Pregnancy	Mean 6-9 months after birth	Mean Dynamics	p
Women (Saint-Petersburg)	1,446	1,284	-0,162	0,120
Women (Cherepovets)	0,786	1,071	0,286	0,051
Men (Saint-Petersburg)	0,845	1,103	0,259	0,106
Men (Cherepovets)	1,614	1,143	-0,471	0,019

The analysis of the dynamics of the relationships with the spouse in men from Cherepovets has shown the opposite tendency: the insignificant increase of marital satisfaction after the child's birth and decrease of viewing relationships as conflictual (Table 1 and 2). The frequency analysis has shown that for 35.7% of men the marital satisfaction has decreased, for 47.1% - increased, and for 17.2% has not changed. It also should be noted, that in both samples the level of marriage satisfaction after the child's birth is higher than average compared to suggested norms, and the level of the perceived conflict – lower than average.

So, we can conclude that the dynamics of marriage satisfaction in men after the child's birth depends on the territorial factor: more enounced negative changes are observed in men from metropolitan area, and for men from a smaller city negative changes are not so enounced and have even a positive tendency.

The study of the dynamics of spousal relationships in women from Saint-Petersburg before and after the child's birth has shown the decrease in marriage satisfaction on the tendency level ( $p=0.057$ ). There were no significant differences in the level of emotional contact and family conflict before and after the child's birth, but the level of the conflict has decreased and the emotional distance with a spouse has increased (Table 1 and 2). The frequency analysis has shown that for 52.5% women the level of marriage satisfaction has decreased, for 25% - has increased, and for 22.5% women the level of satisfaction has not changed.

The study of the dynamics of spousal relationships in women from Cherepovetz before and after the child's birth has shown the significant decrease in marriage satisfaction ( $p<0.01$ ) and increase the level of family conflict on the tendency level ( $p=0.051$ ). The frequency analysis has shown that for 54.3% women the level of marriage satisfaction has decreased, for 28.5% - has increased, and for 17.2% women the level of satisfaction has not changed. It should be noted that for the women with the increase in the level of their marriage satisfaction this increase is lower than the decrease level for the women who's marriage satisfaction had become less.

We should say that in both samples the level of marriage satisfaction after the child's birth in women is higher than average, and the level of conflict – lower than average.

So, we see the decrease in the level of marriage satisfaction and increase in viewing family relationships as conflictual in women in both samples, i.e. the decrease is less dependent on territorial factor. But we should also say that the decrease is observed only in the half of the women sample, the other half does not have change in the marriage or has the increase in it.

The correlational analysis has shown the connection of parameters before and after the child's birth for the marriage satisfaction ( $p < 0.05$ ) and conflict in family ( $p < 0.01$ ) in men, and correlations of emotional contact with the spouse before and after the child's birth only for men from Saint-Petersburg ( $p < 0.05$ ).

The regression analysis has shown that marriage satisfaction during pregnancy is the predictor of its level after child's birth both for men from Saint-Petersburg ( $\beta = 0.412$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and from Cherepovetz ( $\beta = 0.242$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Even the stronger predictor of marriage satisfaction after the child's birth was the emotional contact with the spouse for men from Saint-Petersburg ( $\beta = 0.604$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The further analysis of relations between parameters of spousal relationships in men before and after child's birth has shown the influence of emotional contact with the spouse before the child's birth in men from Saint-Petersburg on the level of conflict after the birth ( $p < 0.001$ ) and the opposite, i.e. the level of conflict before the child's birth influences emotional contact after the child's birth ( $p < 0.05$ ). This means that less conflictual the relationships were before the child's birth the more emotionally warm they will be after the birth; and the more emotionally close were the relationships before the child's birth the less conflictual they are perceived after the birth. There was no influence of conflict in the family and emotional contact with the spouse before the child's birth on the level of marriage satisfaction after the birth.

The study of the relations between spousal relationships in men from Cherepovetz before and after the child's birth has shown the correlations between marriage satisfaction before the birth and conflict level after the birth ( $p < 0.05$ ): the higher level of marriage satisfaction is connected to the lower level of perceived conflict after the child's birth.

The analysis of spousal relationships before and after the child's birth in women from Saint-Petersburg has shown the strong link both between marriage satisfaction ( $p < 0.001$ ), the level of emotional contact ( $p < 0.01$ ) and the level of conflict before and after the child's birth ( $p < 0.001$ ).

The study of spousal relationships before and after the child's birth in women from Cherepovetz did not show the connections between marriage satisfaction across the transition to parenthood, but there was found the correlations between the level of conflict before and after the child's birth ( $p < 0.05$ ).

In women from Saint-Petersburg marriage satisfaction before the child's birth is a great predictor of marriage satisfaction after the birth ( $\beta = 0.676$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), as well as the level of conflict in family before the birth is the predictor of family conflict after the birth ( $\beta = 0.652$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and emotional contact ( $\beta = 0.483$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). For women from Cherepovetz no predictors of marriage satisfaction and family conflict after the birth were found.

The further analysis has shown that the level of emotional contact with the spouse before the child's birth in women from Saint-Petersburg is also related to the level of conflict after the birth ( $p < 0.05$ ): the closer the emotional contact with the spouse was before the birth the lower the level of conflict can be expected after the birth. No influence of family conflict and marriage satisfaction before the child's birth on other parameters of spousal relationships after the birth were found.

Women from Cherepovetz has shown negative correlations between the marriage satisfaction before the child's birth and level of conflict after the birth ( $p < 0.01$ ) which means that women who were more satisfied with their marriage before the child's birth demonstrate less conflict level after the birth.

Further, we have conducted the comparative analysis of the marriage satisfaction parameters, viewing relationships as conflictual before and after the child's birth, as well as their dynamics with regard

to gender. The data analysis has shown no significant differences between the studied variables in the Saint-Petersburg sample. The comparative analysis of spousal relationships before and after the child's birth and their dynamics in men and women from Cherepovetz has shown significant differences in the level of marriage satisfaction dynamics – its level significantly decreases in women compared to men ( $p < 0.05$ ). Moreover, more significant decrease of family conflict was found in men compared to women ( $p < 0.01$ ). This can be explained by its initially higher level before the child's birth in men compared to women ( $p < 0.01$ ) and its level of decrease after the child's birth as well as less level of conflict in women before the child's birth and its level of increase after the birth.

At the next stage, we decided to analyze the influence of the initial level of marriage satisfaction and family conflict on their further dynamics. The analysis of the correlations between the initial level of marriage satisfaction and the parameter of marriage satisfaction dynamics has shown their negative correlation both in men ( $p < 0.001$ ) and women ( $p < 0.001$ ), which demonstrates that the higher was the level of marriage satisfaction during pregnancy, the more significant decrease we see in it after the child's birth and the opposite, i.e. despite the lower level of marriage satisfaction during pregnancy its increase is highly possible after the child's birth. Similarly the level of family conflict and its dynamics are correlated ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Another aspect of studying the spousal relationships is how marriage satisfaction and family conflict are related to each other in wives and husbands. The correlational analysis has shown that marital satisfaction parameters of both spouses are interconnected before the child's birth ( $p < 0.001$ ), but there was no such interconnection after the child's birth. The level of family conflict was not interconnected at either stage.

## **7. Conclusion**

The analysis of the dynamics in men has shown the difference in change dependent on the territorial factor: in men from metropolis (Saint-Petersburg) there is a decrease in marriage satisfaction and increase in the emotional distance with the spouse after the child's birth, at the same time there are no negative changes in the relationships with the spouse in men from a smaller city (Cherepovetz). The study of the dynamics of spousal relationships in women has shown the decrease in marriage satisfaction in about a half of women in both samples, but in a smaller city sample the decrease is more evident.

The level of marriage satisfaction and viewing family relationships as conflictual before the child's birth is the predictor of the level of marriage satisfaction and viewing relationships as conflictual in both groups of men and women from metropolis. For women from a smaller city (Cherepovetz) there were no relations of these parameters found.

Comparative analysis of marriage satisfaction, seeing relationships as conflictual before and after the child's birth, as well as the parameter of their dynamics both for men and women has not shown differences with regard to gender for the metropolitan residents, but for men and women from a smaller city there are significant differences on the parameter of the dynamics of changes across the transition to parenthood, i.e. there is a greater decrease of it in women compared to men.

The analysis of the initial level of spousal relationships on their dynamics has shown that the more positive were the spousal relationships at pregnancy, the more significant is its decrease after the child's birth.

The study of the relations between marriage satisfaction parameters in couple before and after the child's birth had shown their significant correlations before the child's birth but not after the birth.

## 8. Discussion

The results of our study about the decrease of marriage satisfaction in women after the child's birth are similar to the results of other studies (Belsky et al., 1986; Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Clements & Markman, 1996; Collins et al., 1993; Cox et al., 1999; Cowan et al., 1985; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Gottman et al., 2002; Grote & Clark, 2001; Kluwer & Johnson, 2007; Mitnick et al., 2009; O'Brien & Peyton, 2002; Rhoads et al., 2001; Wallace & Gotlib, 1990; and others). At the same time data analysis has shown that the dynamics of marriage satisfaction greatly depends on the territorial factor, i.e. in metropolitan area there is a decrease of marriage satisfaction for men the same as for women, but there is no such decrease for men from a smaller city. These results are somewhat similar to some other studies (Lawrence et al., 2008; Jackson, Miller, Oka, & Henry, 2014; Don & Mickelson, 2014) about the decrease of marriage satisfaction in men and women. This can be explained by the tendency of men to be more involved into parenting, especially in European countries, and the same tendency in Russia in larger cities, so men seem to face the same problems of parenting as women.

The higher percentage of men and women with no decrease and even the increase of marriage satisfaction (compared to international studies) can be explained by the idea that people whose marriage satisfaction decreased after the child's birth may more often refuse to participate in the study.

Very important factor for the family counselling and problems prevention is the correlations between parameters of spousal relationships before and after the child's birth. However, it should be noted, that the higher level of marriage satisfaction before the child's birth leads to its greater decrease after the birth which is similar to the results of some studies (Belsky, Rovine, 1990; Doss, et al., 2009; Lawrence et al., 2008; Salmela-Aro, Aunola, Saisto, Halmesmaki, & Nurmi, 2006). This can be explained by the fact that the birth of the first child often happens during first three years of marriage. These first years of marriage are often characterized by the high level of marriage satisfaction, so to say "uncritical thinking" about the relationships, and later comes the next stage of marital relationships, so called "opposition stage" with the greater number of conflicts and lower marriage satisfaction. So, we suggest that it is possible that before the child's birth the couple may have been on the first stage of spousal relationships, but after the child's birth moved to its second stage, and the high decrease in marriage satisfaction is tied not only the new parenting roles and difficulties of child care but also with this next stage of spousal relationships. If during pregnancy the couple was at the opposition stage, after the child's birth they may have moved to the next stage – compromise stage – so their spousal relationships got better.

We also see interesting that there was the interconnection between the studied parameters of spousal relationships in couples before the child's birth but no such connection after the birth. This can be explained by the fact that after the child's birth the whole family system is changing from dyad into triad, mother gets



more involved into the child care, and fathers try to find their place in this new system. Probably, sometime later we will find again the intercorrelations and congruence of spousal relationships parameters

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