Prenatal Attachment, Depression and Dyadic Adjustment in Couples Expecting a Baby

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ABSTRACT

Pregnancy is a period that entails many changes in the woman's life, man and consequently in the couple's life. Previous studies have shown that parents' attachment to the baby develops in gestational period and correlates with prenatal depression and quality of marital adjustment. They also proved to have an impact on transition to parenthood and overall emotional involvement between the triad. With this study, we aim compare pre-natal attachment and marital adjustment perception between future mothers and fathers in the 27-40 weeks of pregnancy, and the effect of the marital relationship on attachment. We also address mothers' gestational depression to control its effect. After allowing inform consent, 110 Portuguese couples aged between 18 and 50 years, completed the Portuguese versions of DAS-Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), EPDS-Edinburgh Depression Scale (Cox, et al., 1987), MAAS-Maternal Antenatal Attachment Scale and PAAS-Paternal Antenatal Attachment Scale (Condon, 1993). Results shown that woman, compared to men, present a higher level of prenatal attachment to their baby, still in the womb. For both, dyadic adjustment, namely cohesion, correlates significantly to prenatal attachment. Linear regressions conducted per gender, reinforced the impact of the couples' cohesion on the emotional bond developed with the unborn baby. Woman didn't present significant depression symptoms. Although prenatal depression scores have no relation to prenatal attachment, they correlate with the Dyadic Adjustment (cohesion and satisfaction). These results follow previous findings and highlight the importance of including both men and woman, expecting parents in studying the transition to parenthood. Also, we argue that marital family subsystem has a close impact on the future parental subsystem, and on the adaptation and transition to the next challenging milestone on the family life cycle - parenthood.

BACKGROUND

There are several studies that highlight the difference between the mother and the father in the process of gestational involvement as well as the attachment to the baby (Mazet & Stoleru, 1990; Brazelton & Cramer, 1993; Dyrdal & Lucas, 2013). According to the abovementioned studies, maternal prenatal attachment is experienced in a more complex and intense way compared to prenatal paternal attachment.

Marital adjustment has been point out, by previous studies, as a relevant variable for the adaptation of women to pregnancy (Figueiredo, et al., 2008; Fishman & Meyers, 2000). Rapoport and Piccinini in 2006 concluded that marital stability is related to mother - fetal relationship and functions as an internal and external support, essential to emotional stability and subsequently a more intense attachment. In turn, if there is an unsatisfying, unstable marital relationship, this may lead to depressive symptoms and to a lower prenatal attachment scores (Condon and Corkindale 1997, Cox, Holden & Sagovsky 1987, Evans, Heron, Francomb, Oke & Goldng, 2001).

Parenting, as a life project, implies changes in marital life, and individual adaptation to new roles and parental tasks. These individual and marital changes are essential to promote parent involvement and attachment to the baby. The arrival of a new family member requires the couple to reassess values and priorities, readapted and reorganize their marital life. A positive perception of marital relationship is associated to a greater involvement in the entire pregnancy process, as well as increased prenatal attachment. On the other hand, lower marital and family support and an unsatisfactory marital relationship, may act as be an obstacle to the prenatal attachment. In order to compare differences between mother and fathers to be, and the effect of couples relationship, namely, dyadic adjustment on the attachment to their unborn baby, we conduct an quantitative cross-sectional observational comparative study between men and woman 110 Portuguese couples.

METHOD

Participants

- 110 Portuguese couples, 110 men 110 woman future parents, expecting a baby between 27-40 weeks of pregnancy, aged ranged between 18 and 50 (M = 31.41, SD = 6.04). For 57 woman and only 19 men of this was their first pregnancy
- Educational level – **Women**: Higher Education - 43.1%; Highschool degree - 41.3%; 4 to 9 years of schooling - 15.5%

  Men: Higher Education – 24.8%; Highschool degree – 33.9%; 4 to 9 years ofschooling – 41.3%
- Concerning the Socio-professional Situation, the majority of women were employed when they became pregnant (n = 89, 86.4%).
- Participants whose pregnancy was considered clinically at risk or with previous pregnancy interruptions were excluded

Material

Participants completed separately personal data sheet, and the Portuguese versions of DAS- Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976); MPAS / PPAS - Maternal and paternal prenatal Attachment Scale (Condon, 1993); and the future mothers, the EDPS- Edinburgh Depression Scale (Cox, Holden & Sagovsky, 1987). After missing data analysis, data analysis was conducted using SPSS v. 24 with $p < .05$ as reference.

Scales' internal consistency and adequacy to our sample was verified with Cronbach's alpha coefficient :

- DAS presented satisfactory results for the Consensus (α = .97) and Cohesion (α = .75), and lower values for Satisfaction (α = .62), and Expression of affection scales (α =. 60).
- EDPS presented adequate values of internal consistency (α = .84).
- Both attachment scales revealed its psychometric adequacy (MPAS, α = .75; PPAS, α = .82)

RESULTS

Mothers presented ↑ attachment than Fathers (M = 4.38, SD = .35 *vs* M = 4.14, SD = .50 vs)
t (192.36) = 4.078, p <.001)

Women's' age with NS correlations with Prenatal attachment
(r = -93, p = .03), .

Woman present ↓ scores of depression
NS correlations with Prenatal attachment (r = -03; p = .736).

Although, it correlates with marital satisfaction
(r = -.25; p = .008)
and barely with cohesion
(r = -.19; p = .048)

Men's age correlates - with Prenatal attachment
(r = -24, p = .01).

Dyadic Adjustment + **Prenatal attachment**

Couples cohesion
Woman (r = .28; p = .003)
Men (r = .37; p = .001)

($F_{(1.\ 108)}$ = 9.21, p = .003)
($F_{(1.\ 93)}$ = 24.94, p < 001)

Linear regressions with hierarchical method were conducted for each group (fathers and mothers):

Woman's perception of marital cohesion exerts an effect of 3% on their prenatal attachment to the baby ($F_{(1.\ 108)}$ = 9.21, p = .003; R = .28).

Also, for **Men,** marital cohesion is a significant predictor to prenatal attachment ($F_{(1.\ 93)}$ = 24.94, p < 001).

Men's age together with marital cohesion is also signifficant, however as a minor effect ($F_{(1,\ 92)}$ = 13.052, p < .001).

For both woman and men, the first model including only marital cohesion as a predictor, is the stronger one on predicting prenatal paternal attachment.

Dyadic adjustment correlates + with maternal and paternal prenatal attachment. For both member of the couple, the higher the perceived marital cohesion, the stronger tends to be the attachment to the baby still in the womb.

For the future mothers, higher depression scores correlates with lower satisfaction with the relationship to the partner and lower couple cohesion.

Younger men with less previous children present higher attachment scores. For woman age does not have an effect on the attachment to the unborn baby. Also, being a first time mother or having more children, doesn't seem to have an effect (r = -.71, p = .47). Whereas, for fathers, we found a borderline negative correlation (r = -.20, p = .048).

CONCLUSIONS

Results emphasize:

- There is a statistically significant difference between maternal and paternal prenatal attachment; Cohesion is positively correlated with the level of prenatal attachment, so the better the cohesion in the couple, the more intense will be the maternal and paternal prenatal attachment; We did not find any relation between the depressive symptoms felt during pregnancy and the maternal prenatal connection, so it was not possible to confirm the hypothesis; There is a statistically significant relationship between gestational depression and dyadic adjustment. Symptoms tend to arise when there is poor marital satisfaction and cohesion; The variables age and number of offspring had no impact on maternal prenatal attachment, but showed influence on paternal prenatal attachment.
- To sumarize couples' previous ralationship perception, namely the feelings of cohesion, is of the utmost importance for parents involvement and for establishing a strong attachment to the baby. Results highlight the circular relation between he marital and the parental family subsystems. Couples relationship, support and cohesion seem to play a relevant role in the pregnancy process and the changes it entails. Couples' cohesion is important not also to prepare men and women for their future parenting role and tasks, but also, for all family changes implied in this family life cycle, the transition to parenthood.
- Future family studies should continue to focus on prenatal attachment and marital relationship, with a larger sample. This study is part of a larger study conducted on CIP-UAL, a mix-methods longitudinal study project from pregnancy to the first year of the baby.

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