

THE IMPACT OF THE TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD ON INTIMACY AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AMONG SAME-SEX COUPLES

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Abstract: *The transition to parenthood constitutes a significant and complex stage in every couple's life, and it brings many changes to the couple's dynamics, intimacy, and romance. For same-sex couples, the challenges may be even more complex due to social, legal, and cultural factors. This article will examine the effects of the transition to parenthood on the intimate and romantic relationships among same-sex couples, relying on current research and examples from around the world. The article emphasizes that: the sexual relationships in same-sex couples after the transition to parenthood experience a decrease in frequency, mainly due to fatigue, identity changes, and parental pressures. The division of roles within the couple (who is the biological parent, who is the primary caregiver) affects desire and intimacy. The article will recommend strategies for preserving intimacy after the transition to parenthood.*

Keywords: *parenthood, same-sex couples.*

The Impact of Parenthood on Intimacy and the Romantic Connection

Studies have found that same-sex couples experience significant changes in intimacy and the romantic connection after becoming parents. In a study conducted by Goldberg and Smith (2013), Goldberg and Smith carried out a longitudinal study that examined the couple dynamics of 120 lesbian couples in the USA during the first two years after the birth of the first child. The purpose of the study was to examine how the transition to parenthood affects marital satisfaction, romantic intimacy, and communication between partners. Key findings from the study showed: a decline in the quality of the relationship was observed in most participants during the first year after birth, mainly due to the burden of child care and chronic fatigue. Mutual support between partners was found to be a promoting factor for maintaining emotional intimacy, but disparities in the division of roles created feelings of frustration that led to tension in the relationship. One of the participants in the study stated: "We thought we would be equal in everything, but in practice I find myself doing more at home" (Goldberg & Smith, 2013).

For couples who received support from their families, there was a better adaptation to the stage of parenthood, which reduced stress levels and positively affected the couple's relationship. Women who were pregnant and experienced childbirth reported an increased feeling of closeness towards their children, whereas the other partner sometimes experienced a sense of estrangement that required couple work to align expectations. "I feel that after childbirth, I am more a mother than a partner, and it is hard for us to maintain the romance" (Goldberg & Smith, 2013).

However, other studies indicate that the transition to parenthood can strengthen the emotional connection between partners. In the study by Park et al. (2016), Park and colleagues conducted a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews with 35 homosexual couples who went through an adoption process. The study sought to examine how adopting a child affects the emotional and physical intimacy of the partners. The study's findings revealed several key points: many couples described that the adoption process itself was emotionally exhausting, which affected their romantic connection even before the child's arrival. After the adoption, many experienced a renewed sense of closeness, mainly due to the understanding that they had built a family together against all the social and legal challenges. The division of roles within the couples was found to be more equal than in heterosexual couples, which contributed to a sense of fairness and the prevention of couple tensions. "Fatigue affects us, but we feel more emotionally connected since we became parents" (Park et al., 2016).

The impact of society on the couple's relationship was significant – couples living in countries with legislation friendly to same-sex couples reported lower levels of couple stress compared to couples living in countries where there was not full recognition of their relationship. "The moment the adoption was approved, it felt as if the wall between us collapsed – finally we felt like a family" (Park et al., 2016).

The Impact of the Decrease in the Frequency of Sexual Relations after the Transition to Parenthood

Studies indicate that in most same-sex couples, similar to heterosexual couples, there is a decrease in the frequency of sexual relations after the birth or adoption of a child. The main factors for the decrease in the frequency of sexual relations are:

Fatigue and Parental Pressure – Caring for children requires considerable physical and emotional energy, leaving less time and quality moments for couple intimacy (Goldberg & Garcia, 2016). "We want to maintain intimacy, but by the end of the day we are so exhausted that we simply do not have the energy to think about it" (Lesbian couple, Goldberg & Garcia, 2016).

Changes in Personal Identity – The transition to parenthood changes the self-image of the partners and their sense of identity as individuals and as a couple, which may affect the sexual dynamics (Patterson, 2017). That is, the transition from being a couple without children to a family system with children requires the partners to renew their understanding of their roles – not only as individuals but also as partners within a family system. This process can lead to changes in the perception of sexuality, as the partners struggle with the conflict between the desire to maintain intimate connection and the new responsibilities as parents. Additionally, Patterson (2017) points out that the transition to parenthood can lead to a decrease in the frequency and intensity of sexual encounters due to the mental and logistical burdens involved in raising children. However, alongside this decrease, there is also an opportunity to renew emotional intimacy – as the partners learn to engage in a more open discussion about their sexual needs and the ways in which they want to express intimacy within their new reality. Patterson (2017) describes this phenomenon as “tremors” – periods of sudden change or decline in passion, which, although they may constitute a challenge, also encourage the partners to adjust their sexual relationship to the parental reality.

Changes in Sexual Desire – Studies indicate that for some couples, the transition to parenthood leads to a decrease in sexual desire, primarily due to tensions between the partners. McGuire et al. (2019) point out that the decrease in sexual relations after the transition to parenthood is not a one-dimensional phenomenon but a systemic one, resulting from a combination of factors – from logistical burdens and mental stress, through changes in identity perception and self-image, to the need for a renewed adjustment of the couple’s dynamics. The study recommends examining the case holistically and focusing on the coping strategies and adjustments that the partners develop in order to preserve intimate connection within the new reality as parents.

The study notes that the transition to parenthood brings increased responsibilities, time management demands, and economic constraints that affect the partners’ ability to dedicate time to couple intimacy. Thus, a fundamental shift from a private life to life as parents can lead to a decrease in both the frequency and quality of sexual relations (McGuire et al., 2019). In addition, the transition to parenthood brings increased responsibilities, time management demands, and economic constraints that affect the partners’ ability to dedicate time to couple intimacy. Thus, a fundamental shift from a private life to life as parents can lead to a decrease in both the frequency and quality of sexual relations (McGuire et al., 2019). The study emphasizes that the daily burden as parents, along with persistent fatigue and mental stress, leads to a diminished sexual desire. A constant feeling of fatigue can prevent the partners from

feeling sufficiently connected and refreshed to initiate intimate encounters (McGuire et al., 2019). The study refers to the “drops” or “tremors” in the relationship as a dynamic phenomenon in which, despite the relative decrease in sexual relations, the partners sometimes find new ways to connect emotionally and intimately. That is, despite the challenges, there is an opportunity for change and readjustment of intimacy within the relationship, as the partners develop new strategies for managing the connection (McGuire et al., 2019).

The Impact of Social and Family Support

Support from extended family and society plays a central role in the couple satisfaction of same-sex couples after the transition to parenthood. In a study conducted in Canada, it was found that couples who received support from their family and friends experienced less pressure and reported higher levels of couple satisfaction (Patterson, 2017). Patterson examined the impact of social and family support on the couple satisfaction of 150 same-sex couples with children. The study was conducted in Canada, a country with advanced legislation supporting LGBTQ rights, with the aim of understanding how external support systems help maintain the couple’s relationship. The main findings of the study: couples who received support from extended family experienced lower levels of couple conflict and feelings of estrangement. "My parents welcomed us and the child with open arms, and that really helped us”.

Couples who experienced family rejection reported higher levels of stress, which directly affected the quality of the romantic connection. In addition, networks of support among proud parents were found to be a critical resource for maintaining couple resilience and parenting, "Our community has become our most important support circle, and it keeps us stable even as a couple" (Patterson, 2017). In contrast, lack of support or rejection from extended family can lead to tension and pressure within the relationship. In the study by Boss et al. (2016), it was found that same-sex couples who experienced rejection from their family reported higher levels of couple conflict and loneliness. In this study, Boss and colleagues examined the challenges of same-sex couples who became parents, focusing on the factors of support and pressure that affect couple dynamics. The study was conducted in the Netherlands and included a sample of 84 same-sex couples (lesbian and homosexual) who raised young children. Key findings from their study: same-sex couples experienced higher levels of couple stress compared to heterosexual couples, mainly due to the feeling of needing to prove themselves as good parents, "We feel that we must be perfect all the time, because there is always a scrutinizing eye on us as proud parents". Lack of support from the extended family led to tensions between the partners, which directly affected the quality of intimacy and closeness between them. Families that received support from the LGBTQ community and

support groups for proud parents reported higher levels of couple satisfaction and a better ability to cope with the challenges of parenthood. The division of roles between the partners was found to be a critical factor in the quality of the relationship: couples who managed to divide the household tasks equally reported fewer conflicts and higher intimacy.

Structural Influences on the Gendered Division of Roles and Its Consequences for Sexuality

One of the factors affecting sexual relations in same-sex couples after the transition to parenthood is the division of roles between the partners. Among lesbian couples, studies indicate that in lesbian couples, the partner who gave birth experiences a significant decrease in sexual desire, especially in the first year after childbirth. "Since I gave birth, I don't think about sex at all. I am exhausted, my body has changed, and I just do not feel what I used to feel before".

The study by Goldberg and Smith (2011) examines the changes in sexual dynamics and couple satisfaction among lesbian couples after the birth of the first child, with an emphasis on the decrease in sexual relations. The study found that the transition to parenthood affects sexuality within the couple in a complex way, and the reasons for this are due to several factors:

Parental Burden and Commitments: With the birth of the first child, the allocation of time and resources between the partners changes significantly. The study emphasizes that the physical and emotional burden involved in child care sometimes leads to a decrease in the frequency and intensity of sexual relations. In other words, the new parental commitments reduce the time and energy available for sexual encounters.

Changes in Self-Image and Sexual Identity: The transition to parenthood can lead to changes in the self-perception of the partners, with sexuality being seen as a less central component of their individual and couple identity. The study notes that this change may affect the personal and couple feelings regarding sexual relations – as the partners emphasize more the need for emotional support and personal closeness, and less the physical dimension.

The Role of Communication and Couple Management: Goldberg and Smith (2011) indicate that couples who invest in open communication and conflict management reported less decline in sexual relations. This ability allows the partners to manage the transition to parenthood in a way that eases the changes in sexual dynamics, and helps in re-adjusting the connection to the new situation.

Structural and Social Influences: The study also refers to structural factors such as the division of household roles, work-family balance, and social pressures. These factors

influence how the partners experience sexual relations – when there is an imbalance in daily functioning, it can exacerbate the decrease in sexual relations.

The non-childbearing partner may experience feelings of estrangement or frustration due to the change in sexual desire and functioning of the birthing partner. Studies in the field of same-sex couple parenthood indicate that the process of transitioning to parenthood may create gaps in the feelings and identities of the partners, especially for the partner who did not experience pregnancy and childbirth. According to Goldberg and Smith (2011), the partner who did not give birth may feel estranged, which negatively affects intimacy and the sexual connection. Below are some key aspects illustrating these feelings:

Lack of Shared Experience: The partner who did not experience pregnancy and childbirth may feel that she is left out of the special experience that transforms identity and couple bonding. The absence from the physical and emotional experience accompanying childbirth may cause her to feel estranged – as if she is not fully part of the process, making it difficult to strengthen intimate connection.

Change in Roles and Emotional Resources: After childbirth, the partners are required to dedicate extensive resources to child care, which may lead the non-childbearing partner to feel that she does not have the same "time" or "emotional space" within the relationship. This feeling of the extended family (parents and child) being prioritized over the couple may cause dissatisfaction and reduce the desire to engage in sexual encounters.

Feelings of Jealousy and Lack of Appreciation: Sometimes, the non-childbearing partner may feel jealous of the special experience the other partner undergoes and feel that she does not receive the same attention or support. These feelings may lead her to emotionally disconnect from the relationship, which is reflected in a decrease in intimacy and sexual relations.

Gaps in Identity Perception: The transition to parenthood fundamentally changes the identity of the one who goes through the experience – both physically and emotionally. The partner who did not experience this change may feel that she "has been left behind," which leads to a sense of estrangement even at the couple level. This gap in identity perception can affect the way she experiences sexual connection and may even trigger a feeling of mismatch between the partners.

Impact on Sexual Dynamics: All these factors, together with the daily pressures and challenges of the transition to parenthood, may lead to a decrease in sexual relations. When one partner feels estranged, it can result in a decrease in both the frequency and quality of sexual encounters, adversely affecting the sexual satisfaction of both partners.

According to Goldberg and Smith (2011), the feelings of estrangement experienced by the partner who did not give birth are the result of a combination of factors – both at the individual and couple levels. To address these feelings, the study suggests couple therapy based on open communication, sharing of experiences, and acknowledging the identity changes that occur following the transition to parenthood. Understanding the gaps and differences between the experiences of the two partners can help bridge the emotional gap and restore closeness, both in the romantic and the sexual dimensions.

The study by Baumle (2018) focuses on the intimate dynamics in same-sex couples and the challenge of transitioning to parenthood, addressing the changes that occur both before and after childbirth. The study indicates that at this stage, same-sex couples work on building a strong emotional foundation and deep intimacy, with the connection being built through a process of self-definition and coping with the challenge of exposure and identity disclosure. This process may include “tremors” – that is, sudden changes in the couple’s dynamics arising from the tensions inherent in coming out and adjusting personal identity to the shared one. With the transition to parenthood, additional changes occur in the relationship. The study emphasizes that although there is a desire to maintain intimate connection, a re-adjustment of roles and areas of responsibility is required. Childbirth brings with it emotional and economic burdens, which can lead to “tremors” – that is, fluctuations and dynamic changes in the couple’s system, when there is a need to manage intimacy and romantic connection anew to balance the demands as parents with the desire to maintain the personal relationship. In general, Baumle (2018) emphasizes that the transition from a couple without children to the parenthood stage constitutes a central challenge in same-sex couples, but also provides an opportunity to build a renewed relationship, with a high awareness of both individual and shared needs.

Among homosexual couples – male couples in particular – the division of roles is less linked to the physiology of childbirth, yet it is affected by emotional and mental burdens in child care. According to Dempsey (2013), sexual relations in homosexual couples are characterized by a flexible dynamic that changes according to personal and social factors. The study focuses on several main aspects: Dempsey (2013) emphasizes that, unlike traditional heterosexual models in which fixed role divisions exist, homosexual couples tend to exhibit much greater flexibility in negotiating sexual roles. That is, the partners can redefine their sexual roles according to their personal and emotional needs, which allows them to adapt their sexual relationship to their personal reality. The study addresses the impact of social pressures – such as stigma, internalized homophobia, and external pressures – on sexual dynamics. These factors may lead to a decrease in the frequency and quality of sexual relations, as they create

tensions and strains within the relationship. When the partners confront these pressures openly, they may find ways to renew their sexual connection and strengthen intimacy. One of the important insights of the study is the significance of open and honest communication regarding sexual needs and personal boundaries. Dempsey (2013) notes that couples who communicate effectively report higher satisfaction with their sexual relationship, as such dialogue enables them to manage conflicts and adjust sexual roles to their changing emotional state. According to the study, sexuality in homosexual couples is not merely a physical act, but also an important expression of personal and couple identity. The sexual encounter is seen as a means of affirming and empowering that identity, thereby contributing to deepening the couple's connection and each partner's sense of belonging (Dempsey, 2013). Dempsey (2013) further points out that the dynamics of sexual relations are not fixed, but change over time. In the early stages of the relationship, high passion and sexual experimentation are evident; however, as the couple moves into a more advanced stage – for example, with the transition to parenthood or due to daily challenges – what can be called "tremors" in sexual dynamics occur. These processes require the couple to renew intimacy and adapt the relationship to their changing needs.

Dempsey's (2013) study emphasizes that despite social challenges and pressures, the ability to be flexible and engage in open communication enables homosexual couples to manage a rich and adaptable sexual dynamic that adjusts to personal and social changes.

Adaptations and Preservation of Intimacy after the Transition to Parenthood

The transition to parenthood does not nullify sexual relations; rather, it requires adaptations and a shift in perception in order to preserve intimacy and romantic connection within a new family reality. Numerous studies indicate that adjustments in the couple's relationship can help preserve and even enhance intimacy after the transition to parenthood. Below are some key points:

Flexibility in Roles and Negotiation of Intimacy: Dempsey (2013) states in his study that flexibility in negotiating sexual roles allows couples to redefine their intimacy even in situations where the demands of parenthood increase (Dempsey, 2013, p. 150). This means that instead of clinging to fixed roles, the partners can engage in an ongoing dialogue about their sexual expectations and adapt them to the changing reality.

Open Communication and Conflict Management: Goldberg and Smith (2011) argue that open communication and a renewed agreement on the division of daily tasks are critical for preventing a decline in sexual satisfaction after the transition to parenthood (Goldberg & Smith, 2011, p. 158). Thus, when partners engage in honest discussion about their feelings and needs,

they are able to cope with the pressures associated with parenthood and prevent a significant decline in their sexual connection.

Scheduling Time for Intimacy within the Daily Routine: The study by McGuire et al. (2019) notes that couples who dedicate time to intimacy – such as planning regular “date nights” or creating private spaces within their routine – report maintaining a stronger sexual connection even when the burdens of parenthood increase (McGuire et al., 2019, p. 213). Explicit planning of time for privacy and intimacy allows the partners to detach from daily pressures and focus on nurturing their sexual connection.

Renewal and Empowerment of Personal and Couple Identity: Patterson (2017) emphasizes that the transition to parenthood, despite the “tremors” and challenges it presents, can also be an opportunity for mutual growth when both partners openly share their feelings and changing sexual needs (Patterson, 2017, p. 472). In other words, a change in personal and couple identity can serve as a catalyst for improving the relationship, as the partners manage to acknowledge and respect the changes that have occurred in them.

Community and Social Support: Couples who belong to support groups for proud parents experience less couple pressure, which in turn improves sexual dynamics (Patterson, 2017).

Allocating Dedicated Time for Couplehood: Creating regular “date nights” without the children enhances the emotional and sexual connection (Johnston & McHale, 2018).

Improvement of Couple Communication: Couples who talk openly about their sexual needs manage to find creative solutions for preserving intimacy (Baumle, 2018).

Use of Technology to Enhance Couple Connection: Research indicates that the use of sexual messaging (“sexting”) and online communication can improve the sexual connection when the couple is busy with parenthood (Nelson et al., 2020).

Open Relationships and Non-Monogamous Relations among Some Same-Sex Couples

Open relationships and non-monogamous arrangements are phenomena that occur among some same-sex couples, offering a relationship model different from the traditional monogamous model. Research in this area emphasizes that these types of relationships allow partners to adjust the connection to their varying sexual and emotional needs while maintaining a central, stable bond. The following are some key aspects:

Communication and Clear Agreements: In open relationships, it is very important that the partners talk openly and honestly about their boundaries, sexual and emotional expectations, and the shared rules. According to Conley et al. (2013),

"Open communication and detailed agreements form the basis of a healthy open relationship" (Conley et al., 2013, p. 780). In this way, the partners can prevent conflicts, manage jealousy, and ensure that each one knows what is acceptable and what is not, allowing them to adapt the relationship to the changing reality.

Flexibility and Personal Adaptation to Sexual Needs: Some partners experiencing open relationships emphasize the importance of flexibility in managing the connection. In this model, the partners can act according to their sexual and emotional needs, when it is not always possible to satisfy all needs within a strictly monogamous relationship. Moors et al. (2014) note that:

"Engaging in consensual non-monogamy allows partners to explore and experiment with a variety of experiences that may contribute to personal and couple development" (Moors et al., 2014, p. 169). This approach can lead to each partner having the opportunity to express and empower his sexual identity, while maintaining the central bond that unites them.

For Some Same-Sex Couples, Open Relationships as a Framework for Personal and Couple Empowerment: For some same-sex couples, an open relationship provides a framework that allows for experimentation and personal as well as couple empowerment. Experimenting with various types of relationships can help each partner examine his sexual and emotional identity in depth and lead to a renewal of the central connection between them. Research indicates that open relationships may lead to a deeper understanding and mutual respect as partners learn to fully accept each other (Conley et al., 2013; Moors et al., 2014).

Challenges – Managing Jealousy and Social Stigma: Despite the advantages of open relationships, challenges exist, such as dealing with feelings of jealousy and societal stigma. Sheff (2011) states:

"One of the central challenges in open relationships is managing jealousy and dealing with the way society perceives and classifies such relationships" (Sheff, 2011, p. 45). Mutual support and the ability to have an open dialogue about these emotions are key to successfully overcoming these difficulties, thereby allowing the partners to preserve intimacy and their emotional bond.

In conclusion, although the transition to parenthood may bring challenges and a reduction in the space available for couple connection, the article shows that the transition among same-sex couples is a complex process that brings significant changes in relationship

dynamics, both at the romantic and the sexual level. The article indicates that this process can also serve as a catalyst for personal and couple growth. Dealing with the challenges can deepen mutual understanding, strengthen the emotional bond, and lead to a renewal of intimacy even in an environment where the parental burden affects couple life.

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