Coping with Fatherhood:  
The First Year

Richard Gilman, PhD
David Knox, PhD
East Carolina University

ABSTRACT: Fantasy (thinking back to prebaby times) and holidays (going out alone with the wife) are examined here as methods of coping with parenthood for 93 white, first-time fathers. Results suggest that only the holiday coping mechanism is associated with maintaining or improving marital satisfaction. The use of fantasy actually decreases marital satisfaction. These data suggest that the discrepancies in the conclusions of previous "parenthood as crisis" studies may be accounted for through the analysis of coping mechanisms that various fathers utilize.

A declining birth rate and the emergence of the National Organization for Nonparents indicate an increasing concern for the negative effect children have on one's personal and marital happiness. Previous studies on the impact of children on marital happiness have yielded contradictory findings. Using a coping model for first-time fathers, this article suggests one possible explanation for these inconsistencies: Differences in findings on parenthood crisis can be explained by different ways parents cope with such potential crisis.

Furthermore, this study's emphasis on first-time fathers reflects an increased cultural emphasis on the role sharing, by husbands, of childrearing responsibilities. With the father's increased participation, the importance of his coping with the baby becomes paramount.

Drs. Gilman and Knox are Associate Professors of Sociology, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina 27834. The authors would like to thank Mrs. Therese Lawler for her cooperation in making the birth certificates of the Pitt County Hospital, Greenville, North Carolina, available. Additional appreciation is also expressed to Charles Garrison, Yoon Kim, Paul Tschetter, and Buford Rhea for their assistance in developing the questionnaire. This research was supported by a grant from the Research Council of East Carolina University.
Background

Research on "parenthood as crisis" derives from the proposition that the family is an integrated social system of roles and statuses and that adding or removing members will force a major reorganization of that system [1]. Some studies have concluded that parenthood is not a particularly upsetting event. Hobbs [2] observed that "not one of 53 fathers would use the phrase ‘extensive or severe crisis’ to describe his first experience with parenthood." Russell [1] reported that fatherhood was only a slight or moderate crisis event (described as a change of self, spouse, or relationship with significant others that the person defines as “bothersome”) for 272 first-time fathers. On the other hand, parenthood as a crisis event was reported by 83% of LeMasters’ [3] 46 couples and 53% of Dyer’s [4] 32 couples.

Typical complaints of fathers are in reference to financial strain, social restrictions, jealousy, interruptions, and exhaustion: “The expenses caused by the baby coupled with the fact that my wife quit working is about to do me in”; “We can’t go places like we used to”; “When we married, I thought my wife was going to take care of me. As it turns out, she takes care of the baby and I take care of them”; “I can’t watch television or read the newspaper without the sound of a crying baby”; “I haven’t had a good night’s sleep since we brought the baby home from the hospital” [1, 3, 4, 5].

As a general means of coping with an unhappy and frustrating family life, middle-class males typically retreat to their offices, alcohol, and/or other women [3, 6]. While these coping mechanisms may provide temporary relief from the unpleasant situation for the male, they are likely to have negative consequences for the marital relationship:

1. Since relationships begin and continue as a function of sharing mutually enjoyable activities over time, the husband who spends time away from his wife does little to improve his relationship with her.

2. The fact that the unhappy husband retreats alone from the home increases the probability that he will become involved in another relationship. Affairs occur when the spouse is unhappy at home and has an alternative source of interpersonal reinforcement in the form of a secretary, co-worker, or lonely women in a hotel lounge.

Hypotheses

This study focuses on two additional means by which the husband may more successfully cope with the early months of fatherhood: fantasy and holidays. Fantasy (or thinking back to the “good old pre-