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# Factors contributing to separation/divorce in parents of small children in Sweden

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## Abstract

*Objectives:* To investigate factors contributing to separation and divorce in first-time parents. *Methods:* Quantitatively analyzing data using Mann–Whitney-*U*-test, Chi-square and logistic regression analysis test from separated and non-separated mothers and fathers, when first child was six months and four years of age. Outcome measures were quality of dyadic relationship, QDR-index and its dimensions and variables. Also, a qualitative content analysis of comments to one open question about contributing factors to the experienced situation from the separated parents ( $n = 39$ ) was conducted. *Results:* The experienced quality of the relationship measured with QDR-index and especially Dyadic Satisfaction, Dyadic Consensus and also Dyadic Cohesion showed a statistically secured difference between the groups of separated and non-separated parents. The qualitative description showed seven categories of factors contributing to separation: Strains from parenthood, Stressful conditions, Lack of intimacy, Insufficient communication, Differing personalities & interests, No commitment, and Negative effects of addiction. The described factors were in accordance with the factors described in earlier non-Swedish research. Some of the factors may be possibly prevented from leading to separation, such as lack of equality, insufficient communication and lack of intimacy. *Conclusion:* Primary health professionals meet the majority of parents-to-be and new parents and should therefore take on the task of supporting them in their relationships, thereby helping to prevent unnecessary separations.

Keywords: parents, separation, divorce, QDR, contributing factors

## Introduction

### Couple relationships in parents

The transition to parenthood often leads to less relationship quality, and this could result in separation of the parents. Previous research has shown that new parents experience a steeper decline in marital satisfaction than couples without children. This was reflected in the findings of a study conducted by Lawrence et al. (2008) when parents and non-parents were compared. In the longitudinal study by Doss et al. (2009), a gradual deterioration in relationship quality during eight years of marriage was reported, but a sudden decline in quality was seen once the couples became parents, suggesting that this decline is associated with the birth of a child. High mutual awareness and expressions of fondness can buffer against a decline in marital satisfaction according to Shapiro et al. (2000). Howard and Brooks-Gunn (2009) report that emotional supportiveness from the other parent when the first child was one year of age was a predictor for stability in the relationship when the first child was five years of age. If the couples knew each other well and had a stable relationship before parenthood, the chances of them managing the transition into parenthood were better, and married couples had a lower decline in marital quality than cohabiting couples. In Sweden, the parental leave system differs from most other countries in its generosity by including cohabiting parents and entailing one and a half years of paid leave from work, of which two months specifically reserved for the father.

In a longitudinal study, Swedish first-time parents were followed for eight years from the birth of the first child. The relationship quality in general, measured with the QDR-index, showed a decrease at four years, and an increase again at eight years, but still not a return to the level of six months after the birth of the first child. However, the sensual dimension of these relationships, measured in terms of hugs and caresses, steadily declined, while the sexual dimension remained constantly low throughout all three times of measurement. The parents, all living together with their partners, were sexually active only occasionally (once or twice a month) and reported tiredness (Hansson & Ahlborg, 2012). At the follow-up at four years (Ahlborg et al., 2008), this tiredness and low sexual activity included both parents with and without a second child. The level of sexual activity may have been higher between the three times of measurement, but still the decrease of sensuality and the low level of sexuality can be seen as negative and may threaten relationship stability.

### Separation and divorce

We lack studies of contributing factors to Swedish couples' separations. Dutch survey data including 1718 divorced men and women from 1949–1996 were studied (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006). Three types of motives for divorce were identified by factor analysis: *Relational motives* included growing apart, not enough attention from partner, not able to talk, not enough time for each other, and sexual problems; *Behavioural motives* included habits of spouse, alcohol addiction, infidelity and physical violence; and *Household organization motives* included spouse working too many hours and division of household chores. In the second half of the twentieth century, the Behavioural motives decreased while the Relational and Household organization motives increased. Three important trends were noticed: *the normalization of divorces, the psychologization of relationships, and the emancipation of women*. According to the Dutch researchers, problems in the realm of work and household labour have become increasingly important motives for divorce/separation, particularly among women. More importance is

attached to matters such as understanding and communicating and being sensitive to each other's needs and feelings. Couples with children living at home reported more divorce motives than other couples. Besides violence, habits of spouse and infidelity, these included the following: the spouse (male) working too hard, the division of labour in the home, and not being able to talk to one another (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006).

The importance of household organization and fair division of housework in relation to marital happiness and divorce was investigated in American dual-earner marriages, from 1980 to 1988 (Frisco & Williams, 2003). Inequality in the division of housework was associated with a decline in marital happiness for both genders, but for women this was also associated with divorce. There are not any recent studies of divorce/separation in Sweden, making this current study of specific importance, but there is an historical article discussing trends in Swedish divorce behaviour from 1911 to 1974 by Sandström (2011). Sandström's analysis provides support for the hypothesis that changes in conditions determine economic interdependence, which made divorces more attainable especially in urban settings. This emancipation of Swedish women has continued during recent decades, and could be contributing to the increased divorce and separation rates seen in Sweden. This also supports the trends described in the Dutch study by de Graaf and Kalmijn (2006).

An American study by Amato and Previti (2003) describes reasons for divorce in 208 individuals from 1980 to 1997. The most common reasons were: infidelity, incompatibility, drinking or drug use and growing apart. Other reasons were: personality problems, lack of communication, physical or mental abuse and loss of love. Individuals with high-socioeconomic status were more likely to report relational problems, and behavioural (instrumental) problems were more common in individuals with lower socioeconomic status.

Statistics of Sweden (2012) presents a report where 34,000 heterosexual couples having their first baby in the year 2000 were followed demographically until 2010. The average length of cohabitation before having the first child was three years. About a third of the couples were married before the birth of the first child, and the most common time to marry was after two years of cohabiting. Thirty percent of the sample ( $n = 8460$ ) were separated/divorced in 2010, and the average time for separation/divorce was four years and eight months after the birth of the first child.

Described statistically, significant risk-factors for separation and divorce were the following: woman being young, i.e. < 24 years at birth of first child (RR = 2.21), not cohabiting before birth of first child (RR = 2.06), lower education level (RR = 1.40) and lower living standard (RR = 1.45), the man being unemployed (RR = 1.56) or both partners being unemployed (RR = 1.67), the woman born in Sweden and the man born in a foreign country (RR = 1.61), and not being married, but cohabiting (RR = 1.68) (Statistics Sweden, 2012).

Swedish statistics can provide background variables that are contributing factors to divorce, but the complexity in all other factors regarding the experienced quality of the relationship has not been described in recent Swedish research. The aim of this study was therefore to explore contributing factors to divorce and separation among Swedish parents.

## Method

### Design

This study is a descriptive comparative study with quantitative data comparing separated couples with non-separated couples. Also a qualitative content analysis of comments to an open

question about contributing factors to the parent's experienced situation answered by the separated couples ( $n = 39$ ) is given.

The research is based on a longitudinal design with repeated measurements of the perceived intimate relationship quality in first-time parents in the year 2002 (T1) when the first child was six months of age, in 2006 (T2) when the first child was four years of age, and finally in 2010 (T3) when the first child was eight years of age. However, data of the relationship quality, measured with modified Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) is available to compare only from T1 and T2, as the parents who had separated were not supposed to answer the variables of relationship quality at T3.

### Measurements

At T1 and T2, a Modified Dyadic Adjustment Scale based on the American instrument, DAS was used (Spanier, 1979). Modification of the instrument involved adding variables about communication, sensuality and sexuality, according to results from the Ahlborg and Strandmark interview study [3]. The modified version has been thoroughly described, tested and validated with its psychometric properties (Ahlborg, Persson & Hallberg, 2005) and thereafter named Quality of Dyadic Relationship (QDR). QDR has been further developed resulting in QDR36. It has been used and psychometrically tested in a study of 90 men and women living in long-term relationships and on 94 men and women before and after family counselling. The conclusion was that QDR36 (used at T3 among the non-separated couples) provides a useful and comprehensive measurement of relationship quality in different periods and situations in life (Ahlborg et al., 2009).

The modified DAS as well as QDR-questionnaire consists of the following five dimensions:

(1) Dyadic Consensus, (2) Dyadic Cohesion, (3) Dyadic Satisfaction, (4) Dyadic Sensuality and (5) Dyadic Sexuality. The response mean values of the dimensions were 0–5 in the modified DAS.

At T2 the modified DAS was complemented with some psychosocial variables, Sense of Coherence (SOC) consisting of 13 items, and a small number of open questions. The last open question analysed, which was included in the questionnaire at all three measurements, was formulated as follows: "What factors do you think may have contributed to your present situation (either in a positive or negative way)". The couples stating that they had separated since last time of measurement were asked to answer this open question as well as the psychosocial items and SOC-items, but not the QDR-items.

### Ethical concerns

This study was performed in a likely manner at all three times of measurement. Respondents were informed of guaranteed anonymity when they received the questionnaire. Informed consent was given when the participants answered the questionnaire. The local ethics committee of the medical faculty at the University of Gothenburg approved the study in 2002, Ö 584-01.

### Participants and procedure

The inclusion criteria at all three times of measurement were the following: (1) first-time parents (the mother's and the father's first baby together); (2) married or cohabiting parents (at the time of all three measurements); (3) Swedish speaking (to ensure comprehension of the

questionnaire); and (4) healthy baby (to avoid the extra strain caused by an ill child). The procedure for data collection was conducted as follows: at T1, primary care nurses at health care centres in the Gothenburg region, Sweden, distributed the self-reporting questionnaires to the participants (5) and at T2 and T3 the questionnaires were mailed by post to the participants' homes. At T3 participants could also answer on the internet. Two reminders were sent at all three times of measurement.

At T1 there were 820 respondents (response rate 65%). There were 258 responding mothers and fathers remaining at T3 (response rate being 62% among the 417 distributed questionnaires), who had answered all three questionnaires. Among the 258, 16 were found separated. The couples separated earlier were excluded when receiving the questionnaire at T2 and T3, as one inclusion criteria was being cohabiting couple (see the flowchart [Figure 1](#)).

### Non-respondents

Between T1 and T2 the non-respondents (40%) could be analysed. The values of the five dimensions of the modified DAS/QDR at T1 did not differ between respondents and non-respondents at T2. Comparisons between the background variables of the respondents and the non-respondents at T2 were carried out. Among the non-respondents the education level was lower and they were more often fathers than mothers.

At T2, however, 20% of the 306 who did not respond ( $n = 61$ ), were living at different addresses, indicating that they probably were separated and therefore had a natural reason not to respond to the questionnaire. Separated parents could not be included in further analysis.

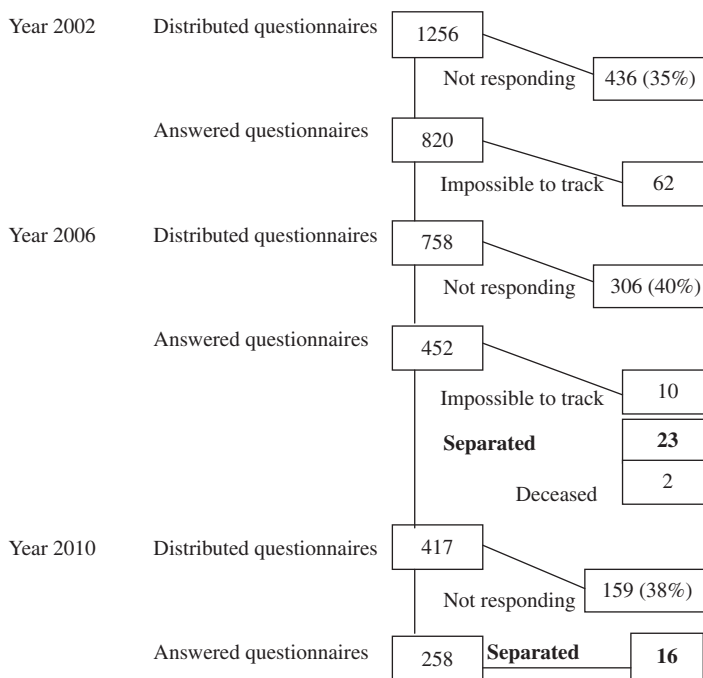


Figure 1: Flowchart of longitudinal study First-time parents' intimate relationships in Gothenburg, Sweden, when first child was six months (2002, T1), four years (2006, T2) and eight years of age (2010, T3).

At T3 there was a non-response rate of 38% and here 15% of the 159 who did not respond ( $n = 24$ ) were living at different addresses. The groups at T3 also had no significant differences in the dimensions of the modified DAS/QDR at T2, but they differed in regard to their economic situations ( $p = 0.04$ ). This was the only significant difference between the groups.

### Respondents

The frequency of separations among the respondents at T2 was 5% ( $n = 23$ ) and at T3 6% ( $n = 16$ ). That makes a total of 39 separated respondents compared with the 242 non-separated respondents remaining at T3. The separated respondents were asked not to answer the QDR-questions, but instead the psychosocial variables and also the SOC-13-items.

The mean age of all the respondents at T1 was 30.3 for mothers and 32.4 for fathers, which is somewhat higher than the average age of first-time parents in Sweden. The civil status of the respondents was representative of Swedish new parents with 46% married and 54% cohabiting (Statistics Sweden, 2008). In this study population, the education level was higher than the average for Swedish new parents. All couples were heterosexual and 98% of the mothers and 93% of the fathers had no children from previous relationships. The mean duration of the intimate relationship before the birth of their first child was 5.1 years.

### Quantitative analyses

Statistical package for the social sciences was used for the registration and analysis of the data. Index, dimensions and all variables of the modified DAS from 2002 and 2006 of the separated and the non-separated respondents were compared using the Mann–Whitney  $U$ -test.

Two variables were dichotomous (not showing love and appreciation and too tired for sex) and were analysed using the chi-square test as well as the categorical background variables (married/cohabiting, gender and economic status).

Bivariate logistic regression analysis was performed with the background variables as possible confounding factors (age, level of education, relationship, time together, employment and economy), the dichotomous dependent variable being separated or not.

### Qualitative analyses

Content analysis (Burnard et al., 2008; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) was used on answers to the final open question at T1–T3 that addressed what the separated parents believed had contributed to their situation. Content analysis is relevant to use when data is a limited text, manifest and without the depth that qualitative interviews can give (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Meaning units were coded, and codes with similar content were united into subcategories, which were put together to form head categories. The categorization was performed by the two researchers going back and forth between the data and the categories and thus consensus was reached after discussions and changes.

## Results

### Quantitative results

Comparing index and dimensions of QDR gave the following results, see Table 1.

At T1 (2002) there was a statistically secured difference ( $p = 0.000$ ) in the QDR index between the separated and non-separated groups. At T2 (2006), the indexes still differed significantly ( $p = 0.004$ ) but not to the same extent as at T1 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Comparisons of QDR-index and dimensions between separated ( $n = 39$ ) and non-separated Swedish parents ( $n = 413$ ) when first child was six months, T1 (2002) and four years of age, T2 (2006).

QDR	Separated	Non-separated	Separated	Non-separated
	Mean (SD) 02	Mean (SD) 02	Mean (SD) 06	Mean (SD) 06
QDR-index	14.89 (2.80)***	16.98 (2.17)***	14.45 (2.90)**	15.95 (2.40)**
Dyadic Consensus	3.65 (0.61)***	4.07 (0.47)***	3.76 (0.52)**	3.98 (0.51)**
Dyadic Cohesion	3.16 (0.93)**	3.65 (0.74)**	2.78 (0.94)**	3.29 (0.87)**
Dyadic Satisfaction	3.18 (0.63)***	3.77 (0.56)***	3.16 (0.57)***	3.57 (0.56)***
Dyadic Sensuality	3.90 (0.88)	4.11 (0.79)	3.00 (0.81)	3.24 (0.80)
Dyadic Sexuality	1.56 (0.57)**	1.84 (0.57)**	1.80 (0.62)	1.84 (0.61)

Mann–Whitney  $U$ -test. Response mean values: QDR-index: 0–25, dimensions: 0–5.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

All the dimensions at T1 except Dyadic Sensuality ( $p = 0.213$ ) differed significantly. Dyadic Consensus and Dyadic Satisfaction both showed the strongest difference ( $p = 0.000$ ). The separated respondents agreed less about different matters and were less satisfied in their couple relationships than the non-separated respondents. Dyadic Cohesion ( $p = 0.001$ ) and Dyadic Sexuality ( $p = 0.005$ ) among the separated indicated that they felt less togetherness in the couple relationship and experienced less quality in their sexual life.

At T2, the most statistically secured difference was regarding Dyadic Satisfaction ( $p = 0.000$ ) where the separated respondents were less satisfied. The difference between the groups had decreased in regard to Dyadic consensus ( $p = 0.005$ ) and Dyadic Cohesion ( $p = 0.008$ ). The differences seen in Dyadic Sensuality ( $p = 0.106$ ) and Dyadic Sexuality ( $p = 0.601$ ) were non-significant. It was found that the values of Dyadic Sexuality were very low in both the separated and non-separated groups.

QDR-variables between separated and non-separated parents gave the following results (see Table 2).

Variables in the *Dyadic Consensus* at T1 differed between the groups with the exceptions of Family economy, Dealing with parents or in-laws and Leisure time activities. On the other hand, at T2 most variables were non-significant except for consensus about Leisure time activities ( $p = 0.003$ ), Friends ( $p = 0.029$ ) and Career ( $p = 0.034$ ).

There were significant differences between the groups in regard to the variables in *Dyadic Cohesion* at T1: Calmly discussing together ( $p = 0.000$ ), Laughing together ( $p = 0.021$ ) and Working together on a task/project ( $p = 0.030$ ). The single variable that did not differ was Stimulating exchange of ideas. Still at T2, laughing together ( $p = 0.001$ ) remained less frequent in the separated group.

The differences between the groups in all variables of the dimension *Dyadic Satisfaction* at T1 were statistically secured: Discussing separation, Things going well in the relationship, Regretting moving in, How often quarrelling and Getting on each other's nerves ( $p = 0.000$ ), How often partner is listening ( $p = 0.001$ ), Misunderstandings ( $p = 0.008$ ), and Confidence in partner ( $p = 0.002$ ). At T2, three of the variables were not statistically significant anymore: Confidence in partner, How often quarrelling and Getting on each other's nerves.

At T1, in the dimension *Dyadic Sensuality*, both Sensual contentment ( $p = 0.026$ ) and How often kissing the partner ( $p = 0.018$ ) were significant. At T2, the difference in Sensual



Table 2: Comparisons of QDR-variables between separated ( $n = 39$ ) and non-separated Swedish parents ( $n = 413$ ) when first child was six months, T1 (2002) and four years of age, T2 (2006).

QDR	Separated	Non-separated	Separated	Non-separated
Item (abbreviated)	Mean (SD) 02	Mean (SD) 02	Mean (SD) 06	Mean (SD) 06
<i>Dyadic Consensus</i>				
Family economy	3.84 (1.20)	4.12 (0.66)	4.09 (0.68)	4.07 (2.11)
Recreation	3.32 (1.13)**	3.84 (0.76)**	3.41 (1.14)	3.67 (0.80)
Friends	3.73 (0.96)**	4.20 (0.65)**	3.77 (0.81)*	4.10 (0.63)*
Correct behaviour	3.70 (0.91)*	4.03 (0.72)*	3.90 (0.70)	4.05 (0.68)
Philosophy of life	3.61 (0.95)**	4.12 (0.70)**	3.91 (0.75)	4.08 (0.76)
Dealing with parents or in-laws	3.87 (1.02)	4.03 (0.78)	3.68 (0.89)	4.02 (0.72)
Aims and goals in life	3.79 (0.87)**	4.21 (0.71)**	3.82 (0.80)	4.09 (0.68)
Amount of time spent together	3.41 (0.96)***	4.00 (0.81)***	3.36 (0.90)	3.87 (0.82)
Making major decisions	3.74 (0.89)***	4.29 (0.68)***	3.95 (0.72)	4.21 (0.65)
Household tasks	3.26 (1.27)*	3.70 (0.86)*	3.45 (0.67)	3.52 (0.92)
Leisure time activities	3.74 (0.86)	3.94 (0.75)	3.68 (0.72)**	3.89 (0.77)**
Career decisions	3.87 (0.93)**	4.41 (2.03)**	3.91 (0.61)*	4.17 (0.72)*
<i>Dyadic Cohesion</i>				
Stimulating exchange of ideas	3.11 (1.09)	3.41 (1.02)	2.73 (1.16)	3.08 (1.08)
How often laughing together	3.79 (1.09)*	4.21 (0.84)*	3.00 (1.15)**	3.76 (0.99)**
Calmly discussing together	2.74 (1.13)***	3.39 (0.89)***	2.55 (1.14)*	3.01(0.97)*
Working together on a task/project	3.05 (1.12)*	3.57 (1.14)*	2.86 (1.04)	3.29 (1.19)
<i>Dyadic Satisfaction</i>				
Discussing separation	4.08 (0.96)***	4.78 (2.57)***	4.09 (0.81)**	4.56 (0.75)**
Things going well in the relationship	3.54 (0.82)***	4.07 (0.65)***	3.41 (0.85)**	3.81 (0.73)**
Confidence in partner	4.08 (0.90)**	4.47 (0.73)**	3.91 (1.06)	4.18 (0.91)
Regretting moving in	4.33 (0.77)***	4.73 (0.56)***	4.18 (0.80)*	4.54 (0.77)*
How often quarrelling	2.92 (1.01)***	3.65 (0.73)***	3.32 (0.78)	3.46 (0.70)
"Getting on each other's nerves"	3.10 (0.88)***	3.67 (0.76)***	3.32 (0.72)	3.51 (0.80)
How often partner listens	3.31 (1.10)**	3.91 (0.89)**	3.18 (0.96)**	3.79 (1.02)**
Misunderstandings	2.90 (0.94)**	3.30 (0.76)**	2.73 (0.88)**	3.20 (0.75)**
<i>Dyadic Sensuality</i>				
How often hugging Your partner	4.28 (0.83)	4.38 (0.81)	3.91 (0.92)	4.00 (0.96)
How often kissing Your partner	3.13 (1.06)*	3.47 (0.85)*	2.73 (1.03)	2.96 (1.08)
How often feeling sensual desire	4.26 (0.88)	4.16 (0.94)	3.76 (1.34)	3.87 (1.08)
How often caressing last month	3.45 (1.11)	3.74 (1.14)	2.90 (1.37)	3.24 (1.19)
Sensual contentment	2.13 (0.78)*	2.40 (0.74)*	1.62 (0.74)**	2.15 (0.78)**

Table 2. (Continued)

QDR	Separated	Non-separated	Separated	Non-separated
<i>Dyadic Sexuality</i>				
Sexual desire	2.64 (1.18)	2.92 (1.09)	3.00 (1.00)	2.93 (1.08)
How often had inter-course last month	1.54 (1.25)*	1.97 (1.07)*	2.19 (1.03)	2.03 (1.09)
Sexual contentment	1.64 (0.71)	1.85 (0.75)	1.62 (0.74)	1.90 (0.80)

Mann-Whitney *U*-test. Response mean values, variables: 0–5.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

contentment ( $p = 0.003$ ) had increased while kissing the partner was non-significant. In both groups, the sensual contentment showed low values.

The variables in *Dyadic Sexuality* at T1 did not vary between the groups except for a low significant difference in Sexual frequency ( $p = 0.049$ ), which had disappeared at T2. All the sexuality values were low, in particular sexual contentment in both groups at both T1 and T2.

The logistic bivariate regression analysis showed that relationship – being cohabiting instead of being married – gave an OR of 2.24 for separation. Being without employment was also significant for separation (see Table 3).

Thus the main findings were the following:

The total experienced quality of dyadic relationship (QDR-index) differed significantly between the separated and non-separated both at T1 and T2, but not to the same extent at T2.

At T1 (six months after birth of first child), the separated respondents agreed less about different matters and were less satisfied in their couple relationships than the non-separated respondents, and the separated felt less togetherness in the couple relationship and experienced less quality in their sexual life.

The difference in sensual contentment had increased at T2 and showed low values in both the separated and non-separated groups at T1 and T2. Also the sexual contentment showed low values in both groups.

### Qualitative results

The separated parents' answers to the open question "What factors do you think may have contributed to your present situation (either in a positive or negative way)" consisted of 62 comments, making the analysis unit. Most of them are from T2, where 28 comments were

Table 3: Logistic Bivariate Regression Analysis showing background variables as possible confounding factors for separation in Swedish first-time parents.

Background variables	<i>B</i>	Sig	OR/Exp(B)	CI 95%
Age	.026	.486	1.026	.955–1.103
Education	–.057	.724	.945	.690–1.295
Relationship	.805	.034*	2.237	1.063 – 4.707
Time together	.072	.181	1.074	.967–1.193
Employment	– 1.294	.008**	.274	.105–.715
Economy	–.139	.084	.699	.465–1.049

$N = 452$ .

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

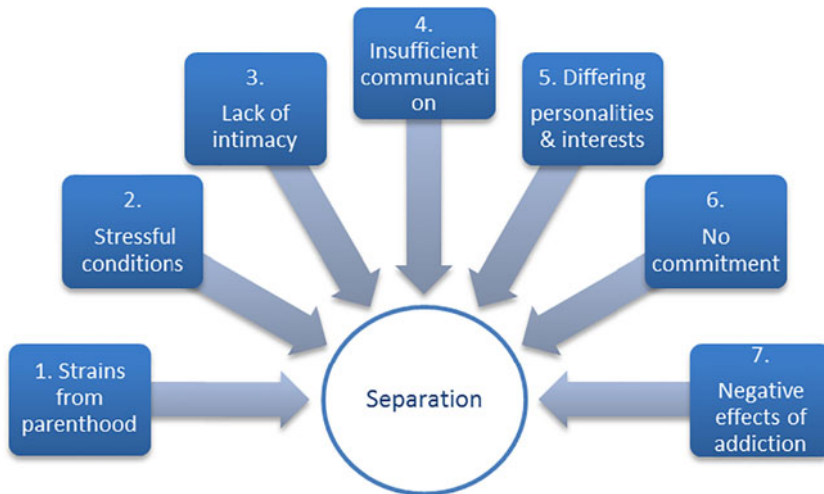


Figure 2: Factors contributing to separation in the longitudinal study First-time parents' intimate relationships in Gothenburg, Sweden, in years 2002, 2006 and 2010,  $n = 39$ .

given (19 from the mothers and 9 from the fathers). At T1, there were 22 comments (12 from mothers and 10 from fathers) and finally at T3: 12 comments (7 from mothers and 5 from fathers).

Seven categories of factors seem to have contributed to separation (1) Strains from parenthood, (2) Stressful conditions, (3) Lack of intimacy, (4) Insufficient communication, (5) Differing personalities and interests, (6) No commitment and (7) Negative effects of addiction (see Figure 2).

After analysing the meaning units and codes, subcategories were revealed. From these, seven main categories emerged; (1) Strains from parenthood, (2) Stressful conditions, (3) Lack of intimacy, (4) Insufficient communication, (5) Differing personalities and interests, (6) No commitment and (7) Negative effects of addiction.

Here follows quotations being examples of comments in each category of factors. The subcategories are in *italics*.

## Strains from parenthood

### Stress

The respondents reported high levels of stress in everyday life as a parent. However, one father was aware of it: "We try to slow down and reduce everyday stress".

### Lack of social support

Living far from relatives led to a lack of social support in everyday life. "We both have our family far away which makes us very lonely".

### Tiredness

The majority of the respondents described tiredness as a problem but the mothers reported it at a higher degree than the fathers. "We are both constantly tired and that naturally affects our tolerance levels". "I'm tired because I am the one taking care of our son all the time".

### Child in focus

Both mothers and fathers stated that the children were in focus all the time at the expense of the couple relationship. "The time at home is occupied by the children, no chance to be together in the couple relationship". "The child always takes first place".

### Transition

The transition to parenthood was seen as a crisis that the respondents were not prepared for and the changes that took place as a consequence were for the worse. "After 13 years together the transition to parenthood made us enemies". "Our relationship changed drastically for the worse when we became parents, despite it being a planned pregnancy".

### Lack of equality

Parenthood led to more traditional gender roles in the relationship where the mothers primarily had to take responsibility for the home and children. "I never get help with anything and have to take care of the baby and the home completely on my own". "We often get into a pattern where I take the role as adult and the father can be more irresponsible" another separated mother stated.

## Stressful conditions

### Housework

Especially the mothers experienced housework as demanding. The fathers talked more about moving, renovations and outdoor activities. "After the children fall asleep there is only 1-3 hours left and they are occupied by housework (mother)". "*Renovating the house takes all my time (father)*".

### Lack of time

The fathers complained about too little private time and time for their hobbies and exercise, while the mothers felt that there was too little time together as a family and in the couple relationship. "I have too little private time, for example to do physical exercise (father)". "You don't have the same time together as before (mother)".

### Occupation

A lot of time and focus were put on individual careers that took a lot of time away from the family and the couple relationship. "We spent all our time on our careers and no time on creating peace and quiet with the family". "We have been working hard with different schedules". It could also be the situation of unemployment ... "The father has become unemployed and lost his role as bread-winner (mother)".

### Practical problems

Logistic problems and sickness in family were among occurring practical problems. "It is a logistical problem when the children are sick". Discontentment about living conditions and earlier relationships intervened in the current family situation. "The custody battle about the father's son from an earlier relationship has affected our relationship". "*My partner is discontent with his living conditions in Sweden*".

### Strained economy

Being a family had led to increased expenses and, especially if the children were sick a lot, this could lead to strained economy. *"My studies are tough, partner works shift, problem when children are sick ... leads to strained economy"*.

## Lack of intimacy

### Lack of sexual life

Many of the mothers described a lack of sexual desire and the fathers a lack of sexual activity with their partner. *"Not having a sexual relationship over a long period of time is bad for the couple relationship" (father)*. Another mother stated: *"We couldn't resume our sexual relationship after a very traumatic delivery ... my physical flaws contributed to this"*.

### Lack of sensual life

*"Not having a sexual life has led to me losing my desire to kiss, hug, and cuddle (father)"*.

### Lost passion

A lost passion could become a consequence of a stressful situation. *"High demands on me led to irritation and suspicion which led to lost passion and sexual desire (father)"*.

### Infidelity

Infidelity led to lack of mutual trust and intimacy: *"Infidelity by the father led to no confidence any more (mother)"*.

## Insufficient communication

### Misunderstandings

Some couples were aware that they misunderstood each other *"Often bad communication and frequent misunderstandings"*.

### No respect

*"We have difficulties in respecting each other's needs', 'We could not communicate without violating each other"*.

### Lack of listening

*"We can't talk to each other and we do not listen to each other"*.

### Difficulties in expressing feelings

*"I easily get angry, frustrated and irritated but I keep it inside (father)"*.

### Conflicts

The insufficient communication could also lead to conflicts *"There is a lot of quarrelling, nagging and whining ..."*.

## Differing personalities and interests

### Different personalities

Being very different from each other created a difficult situation. "We were too different. Struggling to get consensus affected love negatively".

### Different views

It was found that separated couples had different views on love and sexuality. One big dispute was conflicting views on parenting. "Different views on childrearing, different life attitudes", "Our differences regarding values and attitudes have become more obvious". It could also be a question of great cultural differences.

### Different interests

It was common to have different interests, "No common interests except for the children".

## No commitment

### Unawareness

In the separated group, it was found that some fathers did not understand that the relationship was in a bad condition. "I was satisfied in the relationship and don't understand why we separated".

### Drifting apart

Some mothers thought that they were drifting apart, but did not do anything about it "We have grown apart since we met in our early 20s, now we are over 30 and have become completely different people".

### Not seeking help

"You accept a bad relationship for the sake of the children to avoid the shame of separation and failure, but remain bitter parents. And when that step is taken [to get help] it may already have gone too far and the work needed to repair the damage is too much."

## Negative effects of addiction

Addiction of different kinds in fathers led to separation in two of the couples.

### Alcohol addiction

"I separated from the father because he had an addiction to alcohol and it completely ruined our relationship".

### Pornography addiction

"An addiction to pornography was revealed and it turned our relationship upside down".

## Discussion

To summarize the quantitative results, the dimensions Dyadic Satisfaction, Consensus and also Cohesion differed mostly between the groups of separated and non-separated respondents,

which could be regarded as natural. The consensus about economy did not differ between the separated and non-separated respondents, neither at T1 nor T2. However, the complementing qualitative data showed that strained economy in itself could be a contributing factor to separation, and economic factors have been known to be an important predictor of conflict for both married and cohabiting couples (Halliday Hardie & Lucas, 2010).

On a group level, consensus about leisure time activities differed only at T2. Qualitative data showed a tendency of gender difference regarding consensus about leisure time activities. The fathers wanted more private time on their own, while the mothers desired more time together with both the partner and the children. This discrepancy of focus may have contributed to their separation. One could regard being together in the couple relationship as being with the family, including the children. Sensuality between the parents could then be shown with the children present. Seeing the parents showing mutual tenderness may strengthen the harmony of the children and contribute to a secure base and a secure attachment pattern.

One variable of Dyadic Cohesion was laughing together, and this differed between the groups both at T1 and T2. To be able to laugh together creates cohesion and a sense of togetherness, could imply well-being, and seems to be an important component in the relationship quality. The cohesion also may prevent growing apart as a reason for separation, described in the qualitative data, as well as being a relational motive described in the Dutch study by de Graaf and Kalmijn (2006). In the dimension Dyadic Satisfaction, at T1 all variables were significant. That the non-separated respondents had lower values at T2 indicates that the non-separated respondents had less confidence in their partner and more conflicts than at T1. This could be negative for the quality and stability in their relationships. Communication skills remained lower in the separated group, and insufficient communication was also one of the categories in the qualitative data along with misunderstandings, difficulties in expressing feelings and conflicts. That good communication between the partners in a couple relationship is essential for experienced relationship quality supports the results from interviews with first-time parents (Ahlborg & Strandmark, 2006).

In the dimension Dyadic Sensuality, the values of the variable sensual contentment were extremely low at both T1 and T2 in the separated as well as in the non-separated group. At T2, Sensual contentment had decreased primarily among the separated respondents, but also in the non-separated group which is an interesting finding. The low values of Sensual contentment at T2 in the non-separated group is verified by Hansson and Ahlborg (2012). The low sensual contentment could be serious for the relationship stability, missing the compensating role of sensual contentment when the sexual contentment is low, which is described as being of great importance for relationship quality (Ahlborg & Strandmark, 2006).

In regard to Dyadic Sexuality, it is interesting to state that there were no great differences in the variables of dyadic Sexuality found between the groups. Sexual frequency was the single variable that differed significantly between the groups at T1. At T2, this difference did not remain significant. All the values of dyadic Sensuality and Sexuality were at a low level in both groups. Low values of sexuality are then not compensated by sensuality as was described in Ahlborg and Strandmark (2006). These low values of sexual contentment could be a threat to the relationship (Bitzer & Alder, 2000). Parents in general may have less time and energy for intimacy (Ahlborg et al., 2005).

The Logistic Regression model showed that cohabiting couples had a doubled risk for separation compared with the married couples. This increased risk for separation is consistent with the results of Statistics Sweden (2012).

In general, the qualitative data supports earlier research as found in the Dutch study by de Graaf and Kalmijn (2006). Emerged categories of the current study are represented in the motives being described as Relational, Behavioural and Household organization motives. The latter motives are represented in the category Conditions and Parenthood including Lack of equality. Imbalance in regard to responsibility for home and children has been described in several studies, where traditional gender roles are more established after having children (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Grote & Clark, 2001; Möller, 2003). The generous parental leave system in Sweden could be regarded as a facilitator for transition to parenthood. However, Hansson and Ahlborg (2012) describe that mothers in general had more parental leave time and less working hours than fathers when the first child was eight years old. This implies mothers taking a traditional role with greater responsibility for housework and children although they are employed outside home to a high degree.

One category in the current study is not described by de Graaf and Kalmijn (2006) and that is No commitment, consisting of Unawareness (from fathers), Drifting apart as couple and Not seeking help (before it was too late). However, one trend described by the Dutch researchers could perhaps mirror this lack of commitment, that being the Normalization of divorces. Differing personalities and interests may easily lead to drifting apart and separation, and it might not be traumatic at all if the couple do not have children together. Separation could be regarded as natural due to the women's emancipation. However, when having children in common it may be a different situation. Also the mental health has been described as better among non-separated parents than separated parents (Lindström & Rosvall, 2012).

When addiction is involved, and its negative consequences are obvious, separation is often necessary. However, many separations in Sweden are not of that kind, and our challenge in primary health care could be to prevent the unnecessary separations and divorces by giving professional support. One way to support the couples is to emphasize the *importance of sharing the responsibilities* for home and children. Oláh, (2001) has in an epidemiological study shown that the relationship lasts longer and in better harmony when the partner takes an active share of responsibility.

An additional role of professionals could be to support parents in their relationships by emphasizing the importance of sensual and sexual life for experiencing well-being in the couple relationship, when parenthood in itself and the conditions that come with it indicate practical problems and a high level of intensity. By proposing relief for parents so they can be on their own, or in a relaxed atmosphere together with the children, the professionals could contribute to preventing unnecessary separations. In the parenthood group connected to delivery, the midwife could inform parents of basic skills in communication, such as clear concrete messages avoiding accusations, as well as problem-solving techniques (Walsh, 2002). When parents are found to have more serious communication problems involving many conflicts, midwives could then refer couples to family counselling services or psychologists at their health centre.

## Methodological considerations

The great dropout rate is a weakness of the study, but this is a very common factor in longitudinal studies, and especially when the questionnaire is of an intimate character as in this case. According to Asch, Jedrzejewski and Christakis (1997) the mean response rate was approximately 60% in mail surveys published in medical journals and Hager et al. (2003)



reported a general mean response rate in mail surveys of 52%. The response rate in this study was at T1 65%, at T2 60% and at T3 62% which is above the reported mean response rate.

All non-significant variables at T2 could be explained by a possible selection bias, as the non-respondents could consist of more separated couples, as 20% of non-responding couples were living at different addresses. If they had responded at T2, it may have decreased the values of the separated group and the difference could have been significant.

The validity of QDR is strengthened by the results seen in the dimensions Satisfaction and Consensus being statistically different in the separated and the non-separated groups, which could be expected.

The regression model checking for confounding factors showed significance for cohabiting and unemployment. The sample responding was a rather homogenous group; their level of education and economic situation were better than the non-respondents. Thus was the socioeconomic status higher among the respondents than the non-respondents. Among the responding separated parents, only two reported strained economy. In this sample, the economic situation does not seem to be a contributing factor to separation. Country of birth as a possible confounder was not investigated, but they all had to understand Swedish well, to be able to answer the questionnaire.

The qualitative results are congruent with earlier research indicating a credibility of current results.

The qualitative data were written down, making it impossible to ask further explorative questions, which is a weakness compared to interview data. However, having quantitative personal data as well, made it possible to understand the context.

The statements described reasons in what way they experienced their relationship negatively, and could have contributed to the separation, which was assumed without knowing this for sure, except when they answered the open question *after* they had separated. However, this unique longitudinal qualitative data with both positive and negative factors, reported by the parents in their own words, could be regarded as a credible base for this assumption.

## Conclusion

The experienced quality of the relationship and, in particular, the factors Dyadic Satisfaction, Consensus and also Cohesion differed significantly between the groups of separated and non-separated couples. The factors contributing to separation were in accordance with factors described in non-Swedish research. Some of the factors could be possibly prevented from leading to separation, such as lack of equality, insufficient communication and lack of intimacy. Here professionals in primary health, who meet the majority of new parents, can have the task of supporting couples in their relationships, and thereby helping to prevent unnecessary separations.

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