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## From Dyad to Triad: Parental Negotiation of First-Time Parents

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From Dyad to Triad:  
Parental Negotiation of First-Time Parents

Submitted by  
Danielle M. Yanez, LSW

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

## **Abstract**

Becoming a first-time parent can be a major transition for a marital dyad as they begin a new journey in life with their child. While there is a lot of research already surrounding marriage and parenthood, there is little regarding parental negotiation. The purpose of this study was to find ways in which married couples who are first-time parents negotiate and make decisions related to values and making plans for their child's future as examples. The research design for this study was qualitative, exploratory, and consisted of six in-person interviews that utilized open ended questions. Eleven adult participants were interviewed for this study. The findings of this study identified four emerging overall themes that came from the interviews. These themes include: the experience of transitioning into parenthood, dyad protection, beliefs and values based on family origin, and negotiation of decisions. It is important for social workers to understand how the role of first-time parents affects the marital dyad and the child.

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## **Introduction**

Parenthood and marriage have been longstanding traditions in society. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), 42 percent of married couples have children of their own in the household. Becoming a first-time parent can be a major transition for the couple as they begin a new journey with their child. The couple may face many stressors, challenges, and successes along the way. Brotherson (2007) may capture it best when he stated the following about becoming a parent, “Nothing changes a person's life quite like bringing a new child into the world, and nothing changes a marriage or couple relationship quite like a new baby does either”(p. 7).

There are many resources available for first-time parents that serve as possible guides to prepare couples for parenthood. Such resources include “how to” or “what to expect” books that offers advice to parents. First time parents face a lot of new issues once they transition to parenthood. Such issues include: lack of sleep, less time for the other partner in the relationship, possible financial hardships (one partner no longer working to care for the baby), stress, and lack of confidence with parenting skills (Brotherson, 2007). These are just a few examples of what first-time parents may have to deal with once the baby is born. Williams, Edwards, Patterson, and Chamow (2011) stated that, “Although parenthood ushers in tremendous happiness for most couples, the transition to parenthood poses two major challenges: (1) the impact it has on the marriage or relationship; and (2) the challenges of learning the skills needed to be an effective parent” (p. 175). First-time parents not only have to work on how the baby now affects the couple’s relationship, but also have to find ways to parent.

Literature from previous research completed shows that becoming a first-time parent can include also include other associated transitions, such as: gender roles and the new division of labor, marital satisfaction, and how family background may impact the couple's relationship before and after parenthood.

A married couple likely has established roles and responsibilities within the home before they become parents. Once they enter parenthood, these roles and responsibilities can change after the baby is born. The division of labor seems to unequally change as the woman in the relationship takes on more responsibilities at home and possibly in the workplace as well (Koivunen, Rothaupt, & Wolfgram, 2009). Kluwer, Heesink, & Vliert (2002) also found that women in the marital dyad complete more tasks with chores in the home and caring for the child as well. This can place a bigger burden on the couple and their relationship as well as the couple works to figure out these roles.

Studies have also shown that once a married couple transitions to parenthood, satisfaction within their marriage may decrease. Nichols (2010) stated that, "The birth of a child increases stress for many couples and can be associated with growing dissatisfaction with the relationship if a couple does not adapt well to the transition to parenthood" (p. 436). Couples have to not only adjust to becoming first-time parents and all the factors included with the new responsibilities, but also have to work on adjusting to their new roles within the relationship itself. Should couples not deal with the new transition in the relationship, they are more likely to face troubles in their marriage.

When couples decide to get married they are essentially combining two different families and creating their own dyad. Theorists, such as Carl Whitaker, have said that marriage combines two family groups which impacts the way couples create their

marriage. Nichols (2010) stated, “According to Whitaker, there’s no such thing as a marriage-only two scapegoats sent out by their families to perpetuate themselves” (p.197). It is important that this new dyad find their own identity which is separate from the family they came from (Williams, Edwards, Patterson, & Chamow, 2011). Married couples work to establish aspects of their relationships based on family backgrounds, traditions, beliefs, and values. When the couple transitions to parenthood, they have to decide whether or not or even how to include family backgrounds within their own parenting skills. While other theorists have pointed out the importance of differentiation from families of origin, less is known about how couples as first-time parents make decisions about parenting.

It is important for social workers to understand how the role of first-time parents affects the couple and child. There are many facets of becoming a first-time parent and social workers may work within many different settings. A couple may come to see a therapist for marital counseling after transitioning to parenthood. A family may be in need of services through the local nutrition programs, such as, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) where a social worker may be the one to assist them. A social worker may also assist a family with parenting classes in the community. Whichever the case may be, it is helpful that social workers have knowledge of couples and the transition to parenthood.

This qualitative study focused on such parenting decisions within two particular arenas: protecting the marital dyad (focusing on the couple) and plans for the child’s future. The study looked at how implicitly versus explicitly these decisions are made,

how they are negotiated by the couple, and how their own family background may impact these decisions.

This researcher found that these two arenas are important as they involve the whole family system. This study provided a variety of experiences from married couples who have transitioned into parenthood. Social workers will continue to be needed to work with married couples and families. This study offered findings that will hopefully benefit social workers now and in the future while working with this population.

## Literature Review

### *First-time parents*

Becoming a parent for the first time can be such a wonderful experience, but it can be overwhelming as well. First-time mothers not only have to prepare themselves for becoming a parent, but have to actually get through the physical as well as the emotional dimensions of giving birth or adopting the child. In the United States, parenting and birthing classes, parent clubs, advice books, and parenting television shows are just some examples of where first-time parents get their information (Larossa & Sinha, 2006). Once the child is physically with the parents, reality sets in and parents are often found asking themselves, “what do we do now?”

Curran, Hazen, & Mann (2009) conducted a study which examined what couples perceived the transition to parenthood would be like before the baby was born and what they expected their spouse to be like as a parent. What they found was that first-time parents who had thought the process would be a smooth and relatively easy transition were disappointed when this wasn't necessarily the case. The transition was sometimes more than what they had anticipated. The study showed that in this situation spouses often placed blame on the other spouse for these feelings. The spouse also found ways to disagree with the other spouse's parenting skills and did not approve. Although first-time parents can prepare themselves for what parenthood may bring to the relationship, they ultimately don't know how it will affect them until the child is actually in their presence.

First-time parents enter a new phase of their relationship when they become parents. What may have been familiar and the norm for them suddenly becomes the opposite as they learn how to reorganize their lives with a child. The established and

comfortable dyad now becomes a triad. First-time parents who participated in a parenting class admitted that they had to find new routines within the triad. Experimenting with new ways of getting things done within the home or even going out was a new challenge they had to face. It was all a new learning process as they became first-time parents (LaRossa & Sinha, 2006). In the study completed by LaRossa & Sinha (2006) the professional educators who completed the parenting class noted the importance of focusing on positive experiences and feelings of becoming a first-time parent. Becoming a first time parent can have many negative experiences and feelings due to realities of parenting, i.e. lack of sleep, loss of personal and couple time, never-ending housework, colic child, etc. Parents should take time to also highlight the positives with the new experience of parenthood (LaRossa & Sinha, 2006). It can become overbearing for the first-time parents to only discuss the negative feelings and stress that is involved with becoming a parent.

Previous literature has shown the importance of parents, especially mothers preparing themselves for the impending birth of their child. When a woman is pregnant, biologically her body goes through physical changes and prepares itself for the upcoming birth. Research has shown that it is also important for the father, in a heterosexual dyad, to prepare himself for the birth as he has a vital role in caring for the child and supporting his spouse (Deave & Johnson, 2008). According to Deave & Johnson (2008), the responsibility of preparing for the child should be a shared role among the couple. Deave & Johnson (2008) found that fathers want to be informed and prepared of what to expect during this major life transition of becoming a parent for the first time. With so much

focus put on mothers and the baby, fathers have tended to have less attention focused on them regarding the new transition (Deave & Johnson, 2008).

Deave & Johnson (2008) completed a qualitative study which interviewed first-time fathers. The sample they interviewed included 20 men from different areas. The men were selected by a midwife who was completing the research for this study. The midwife researcher interviewed the men two times: once in the first trimester of pregnancy, and then again 3-4 months after birth. They were asked specific questions regarding parenthood and asked to share their feelings about becoming a first-time parent. The researchers were also interested in finding out whether or not the fathers felt they had enough education and support by staff within the healthcare systems. The study found fathers had felt left out as they were not as informed and able to be as involved with the transition to parenthood, from their perspective. Some fathers reported they felt a lack of support and resources available to them. They didn't have healthcare professionals who could offer advice or supportive information regarding the transition to parenthood. The study suggests that more be done on the healthcare professional side. Classes that are specific to first-time fathers should be offered as a safe place where men can come and learn about parenthood and share their feelings. Fathers often report wanting to be more involved in the transition to parenthood as it can lead to a better relationship with their partner and child. It is important to keep fathers educated and involved with the transition of parenthood as it can help the couple adjust to becoming a family (Deave & Johnson, 2008).

As parents work at trying to find their own groove within the transition of becoming parents, they enter the new world of parenthood. Being a part of this new

world can be challenging as first-time parents work at raising their child. There can also be other challenges first-time parents face within their group of friends or family. Bartell (2006) found that first-time mothers can also face pressure from other first-time mothers regarding parenting. As the first-time mother enters this new world of parenthood, she often looks to find other mothers to share experiences and feelings surrounding the transition. This can be great support to the first-time mother as she may have found someone to share stories and advice with; however, it may be a time of parental competition and judgment of her peers. Bartell (2006) reported that first-time mothers were more likely to compare their child to that of other children in her new peer group. First-time mothers often felt their child needed to be the first in the group to do specific age related activities even if the child wasn't ready to do so. First-time mothers felt the pressure that their child had to be exactly where the children of their peers were at developmentally. This would at times leave the first-time mother feeling inadequate and asking herself what she was doing wrong as a parent. Bartell (2006) reported that as time went on the first-time mother needs to realize that children grow at different developmental stages and no two children are alike. Bartell states, "When a first-time mother realizes this she will stop comparing her child to other children and may feel less pressure to be like her peers" (p. 26).

#### *Gender roles and division of labor*

Society has seemed to establish what defines traditional gender-roles surrounding parenthood. Society has influenced attitudes surrounding gender roles that men and women play while transitioning to parenthood. Katz-Wise, Priess, & Hyde (2010) reported that it may be that couples fall into these traditional gender roles due to the

actual physical needs of caring for the child. A father who may feel the need to financially care for his family may take on a lead as the primary breadwinner for the family. The mother who is the sole person responsible for nursing the child now takes on a bigger role as becoming the primary caregiver for the child.

When couples transition into parenthood they tend to take on more of the traditional family roles. Mothers who work outside of the homes often either cut back on the amount of work hours they put in, or they remain at home as full-time mothers. Fathers tend to work the same amount if not more once they become a parent (Singley & Hynes, 2005). Research has shown that mothers from across all races and ethnicities take on more of the duties with parenting and household chores (Singley & Hynes, 2005). Mothers are continuing to work more in the home even when they are off the clock from their outside place of employment (Sanchez & Thomson, 1997). Although many couples fall into the traditional gender-roles when they become parents, they are more likely to go back to equal gender-roles when their child gets older (Katz-Wise, et al, 2010).

Kluwer, Heesink, & Vliert (2002) completed a study and found that first-time mothers had reported they felt the division of labor within the home was unequal. Wives felt that they were doing majority of work in the home. The wives also reported that they didn't have time to resolve these feelings with their spouse due to demands of caring for the new child. When couples don't deal with issues that come up during the transition to marriage, such as division of labor, this could lead to bigger issues for the couple in their marriage.

Recent research has shown that fathers often want to be more hands-on and involved with the transition of parenthood. LaRossa & Sinha (2006) report, "The fact of

the matter is men have been attending parent education programs in the United States for over 75 years” (p. 441). Men report wanting to be more active in the transition of becoming a parent and helping out more with parenting roles. Kovunen, Rothaupt, & Wolfgram (2009) reported that based on current research studies, when fathers participated in education classes that were focused on parenting skills and support for their marriage, the transition to parenthood might have been a little easier on the father and mother. It’s not necessarily that men don’t want to take on a bigger role with parenting and the division of labor; they just may not always know how to jump in and do their share. This is why it is again important for both husband and wives to voice their feelings about roles within the home and with child care giving.

Sanchez & Thomson (1997) reported that more men are taking on the non-traditional role of staying at home to care for their children than previously before. They also report men are completing more of the household tasks that were traditionally done by mothers. Sanchez & Thomas (1997) also report that although fathers are starting to take a shift in gender role within the transition to parenthood, women still remain the primary caregivers of the home and the child.

### *Marital satisfaction*

Once a child enters the world of a marital dyad, there are many changes that occur within the relationship. These changes can either negatively or positively affect the relationship. Many researchers have completed studies regarding marital satisfaction once married couples have a child. Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere (2000) completed a study which interviewed married couples pre and post pregnancy to see if marital satisfaction decreased or increased after they had a child. They found, “For couples who

became parents in the present study, marital satisfaction declined for 67% of the wives and remained stable or increased for 33% of wives” (p. 67). The study found that wives who had a child reported a higher level of dissatisfaction versus wives who were childless. The study found that when the couples were more attentive and affectionate with each other prior to having a child, the more likely they remain satisfied during the transition to parenthood. Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere (2000) define these as ‘buffers’ couples used to help maintain their relationship during the transition.

In a study completed in Sweden by Ahlborg & Strandmark (2006), some of the couples (who were first-time parents) interviewed stressed the importance of finding time for each other and their relationship. They found that maintaining focus on the couple should be a goal of both partners involved in order to maintain marriage satisfaction. When couples become parents their focus can easily shift to their new child, however, couples also need to keep nurturing their relationship and find couple time. The results of this study also found four main factors that seemed to be most important in order to maintain relationship satisfaction. These four main factors were: “Coping by adjustment to the parental role, intimacy, coping by communication, and coping with external conditions” (Ahlborg & Strandmark, 2006). The couples reported feeling more connected to their partner and overall satisfied with their relationship when all needs in the four areas were being met.

Couples who have reported marital dissatisfaction can also be negatively affected in other areas. Lindahl, Clements, & Markman (1997), reported that,

Studies have shown that couples in unhappy marriages tend to demonstrate poorer parenting than those in happy marriages, such that members of distressed

marriages are less likely to be sensitive to their children's needs and show less positive affect, approval, and affection toward their children (Goldberg & Easterbrooks, 1984) (p.139)

Couples who are unhappy within the marriage may not even realize they are negatively impacting their relationships with their own children. Marital satisfaction is not only important to the couple, but to the entire family system.

Lindahl, Clements, & Markman (1997), found that when married couples were happy and able to effectively communicate about issues in their relationship the better they were able to meet the needs of their child as well. The research suggests it is important for married couples to validate each other's feelings and exhibit a healthy way to communicate with one another. These interactions can greatly impact the child and future relationship interactions the child may have.

Houts, Barnett-Walker, Paley, & Cox (2008), reported men in marriages were often the first ones to notice lack of time and intimacy in the relationships when the couple became parents. This change seemed to come rather quickly after the birth of their child. Wives in the study were often consumed by taking care of the new baby and seemed to not realize how much this impacted the marriage. The needs of the new baby were the new focus for the couple. When couples didn't address these issues, there was reported dissatisfaction within the marriage.

Cowan & Cowan (2000) reported that most couples find that there is a significant lack of time available once they become first-time parents. Time that was once devoted to the couple as a dyad now shifts to the focus of the new baby. Couples now find that there is barely enough time to care for the needs of the new baby and other tasks needed

around the home. This leaves little time left for the married couple. Cowan & Cowan (2000), also reported that even when couples do have time to spend together and get out, it takes on a larger task itself by making sure the baby is taken care of by someone else.

Research has shown that there are many different ways in which marital satisfaction can change after the birth of a child. Cowan & Cowan (2000) state, “These mounting strains and pressures begin to affect the more intimate aspects of the relationship between them—their caring, closeness, and sexual relationship; the amount of conflict and disagreement; and their feelings about the overall marriage” (p. 105). It is important that the married couple address the possible issues that may arise after the birth of the child. Marital dissatisfaction seems to occur most when couples tend to not talk about these new issues and find ways to resolve them. This can lead to bigger problems for the couple and even possibly divorce.

Petersen (2011) reports that family and marriage therapists are suggesting that couples seek counseling prior to having a baby. This would allow the couple to discuss possible issues that may emerge from having a child. This would also allow them to discuss expectations they have for each other.

### *Family background*

There is no doubt that family of origin can influence a married couple in their relationship. Curran, Hazen, & Mann (2009) state, “Couples’ expectations about marriage are likely to be shaped by their observations of the marital relationship they grew up with, that is, their own parents’ marriage or relationship” (p.2). When couples marry they are essentially bringing together two separate set of values and belief systems to help form their own family.

Cowan & Cowan (2000) found that when two people come from family backgrounds where conflict was present, they are more likely to repeat this behavior in their own marriage. Volatile marriages may be mirroring the relationships they were exposed to as children. Couples may not even be aware that they are doing this in their relationship. Marriages can possibly be affected when partners haven't yet dealt with unresolved issues stemming from their family of origin.

Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring (2003) reported in their research that when married couples are exposed to positive experiences within their family of origin, the more likely they are able to adjust to their own adult relationships. Partners who come from families where relationships were healthy and experienced positive communication skills were shown to better adjust to marital relationships they were involved in. When partners experienced negative behavior within their family of origin, they were more likely to have a harder time adjusting to the new marriage. This made it more difficult for that partner to transition into the new role as husband or wife.

Botha, van den Berg, & Venter (2009) found that adults who experienced positive parental interactions and communications as a child, were more likely to find a better suited partner for marriage. The roles they learned as a child from their family of origin helped them adjust to the new roles they had within the marriage. They were also more likely to respond positively to the needs of their partner. It seems that the positive behavior learned in the family of origin carried over with the partners into their new marriage.

Previous research has shown that family of origin does indeed seem to impact marriages to some degree, but who does it seem to affect more, the wife or the husband in

the relationship? Topham, Larson, & Holman (2005) found in their research that wives' family of origin continues to impact the new relationship after marriage. When a wife has a strong relationship with her family of origin, she is more likely to intertwine this relationship with her marriage. On the other hand husbands seem to break away from their family of origin and focus more on their new relationship with their wives. The couples then have to find a way to create their own relationship without letting the family of origin impact it too much or too little.

This can be a lot for the new couple to deal with and possible conflict can erupt from this situation. It is important for the couple to discuss what they want to bring into their new relationship from their families of origin and what they want to leave behind. There can be both positive and negative aspects they have experienced in their families of origin and have to decide what is right for them as a couple. This will further allow them to move forward in a new relationship that consists of what they want in their marriage.

This literature review has touched on some of the topics married couples may face within their marriage: becoming first-time parents, gender roles and the division of labor, marital satisfaction, and family background. These topics are just a few of the many issues married couples deal with in their relationships. While there is a lot of research already out there surrounding marriage and parenthood, there is little regarding parental negotiation.

This study looked at how married couples look at negotiating similarly and differently when they became first-time parents. The study specifically looked at ways in which the married couple negotiates keeping the marital relationship a priority, and how

their own family of origin may affect ways in which they now parent and plan for their own child.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of structural family therapy was used in this study. Harry Aponte is a well-known, influential, and contemporary structural family therapist. His most current work is in relation to both spirituality and poverty arguing that in contemporary society, a broader and different definition of “poor people” is needed. In his book, *Bread & Spirit: Therapy with the New Poor*, Aponte (1994) states that people can feel poor within their spirits and not necessarily only within their bread (lack of physical things, such as, money and personal property). He argues that this lack of *spirit* affecting the new poor needs to be addressed as it can affect not only the individual, but the entire family system as well. While this study did not focus on low income adults, it did focus on the question of how couples negotiate values. Aponte identifies the importance of understanding values of the family.

Aponte (1994) discusses the importance of negotiating values with both the family and the clinician. He argues that value systems are both essential to the family and the clinician while working together in therapy. First-time parents may base their parenting decisions on the values they have established. This may influence the way parents make choices regarding discipline, schooling, and other future plans for their child. Aponte (1994) highlights some of the ways in which values may impact therapy while working with families, specifically diverse and lower income families.

Aponte (1994) states:

1. Underorganized families also tend to be underorganized about their values, lacking a strong sense of identity, self-worth, and life purpose;
2. Families with underdeveloped value systems are vulnerable to the imposition of values by agency workers who have legal authority and may control access to society's resources, such as hospitals, schools, and public welfare agencies;
3. The ability of these clients to assume direction of their lives and solve their problems depends on their having a value system that supports the autonomy and power of their self, and community. (p. 168)

Aponte (1994) identifies the importance of working with the family to find possible factors which may have caused their values system to be compromised or interrupted. He stresses the importance of allowing the family to explore this and to find their own family value system.

It is also important for clinicians to be aware of their own values and family value system as it can affect the ways in which they provide therapy. Aponte (1994) states that clinicians' values may or may not indirectly play a part in their professional work. He reports it is important for clinicians to identify how their own values will reflect in the work they do with families. Clinicians should be mindful of self-awareness and not let their own values influence what they think the family's values should be.

This conceptual framework of structural family therapy was used in this study because values can be of importance to everyone. Typically people learn values from their family of origin, whether positive or negative. This study focused on

married couples as first-time parents. When the couple marries they are merging two sets of family value systems to form their own.

Couples who participated in this study were asked about family of origin and how their values and experiences have influenced the ways in which they parent and formed their own family.

## **Methods**

### *Research Design*

The purpose of this study was to find ways in which married couples who are first-time parents negotiate and make decisions related to values while making plans for their child's future as examples. It also built on existing research by way of exploring how couples as first-time parents "protect and maintain" their relationship or adult dyad during this potentially difficult transition to parenthood. The research design for this study was qualitative and exploratory. This study consisted of six in-person interviews that utilized open ended questions (attached as appendix A).

### *Population and Sample*

The sample for this qualitative study included married couples who are first-time parents and have at least one child under the age of six years old. The couples were interviewed and asked to share their responses based on the researcher's questions (see Appendix A). This specific sample was chosen based on the experience the couples have as first-time parents as well as being in a marriage. The sample was chosen from a private in-home day care facility in Saint Paul, Minnesota. This researcher professionally knows the owner of the in-home day care facility. During a conversation with the owner at a mutual gathering, the owner informed this researcher that the day care facility is currently serving several children under the age of six years old. As this age group is ideal for this study, this researcher asked if they were interested in allowing this researcher to approach parents at the facility to ask if they would be willing to participate in this study. The owner stated that this would be allowable as parents may be interested in participating in this study.

### *Protection of Human Participants*

Completed paperwork and forms were submitted to the University of St. Thomas for approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researcher of this study created consent forms containing the University of St. Thomas' IRB template, as a way of creating informed consent and in order to better explain the nature of this study. An agency approval letter was also completed for the owner of the in-home day care facility to sign, which allowed this researcher to send an invitation letter home with parents with a way to reach this researcher. This researcher also included a snowball sampling strategy on the IRB proposal asking potential participants to invite others to participate in the study.

The consent form explained that participants of this study would remain confidential. This study did not use participants' names throughout the entire research process and while reporting findings. Quotations used did not include names of participants and any potentially identifying information (such as names of cities, workplace, etc., were broadened and/or removed.) Consent forms were reviewed in person with each participant, signed, and collected in person the day of the interviews. Participants had the opportunity to opt-out of the interview should they had chosen not to complete the process or to skip particular questions. Participants were not given the questions ahead of the interview. Couples who choose to participate in this study were given a \$10 gift card to Caribou Coffee as a "thank you" for their time spent with this researcher during the interview.

This study included in-person interviews that were audio recorded. This researcher used these recordings for research purposes only. These recordings were

reviewed and transcribed by this researcher and results were reported in the findings section of this research study. Once these recordings were finished being reviewed and transcribed, the tapes will be destroyed no later than May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013. These tapes are stored at the home of this researcher. The tapes and consent forms will remain in a locked file box, for which only this researcher has keys to access.

### *Data Collection*

This researcher completed interviews with married couples who are also first-time parents selected from a private in-home day care facility in Saint Paul, Minnesota. These interviews were completed in-person with the couples at their homes. One of the interviews included one participant as her husband did not want to participate. This interview occurred at a restaurant. The interviews themselves were semi-structured and somewhat more relaxed, with the goal of freeing up couples to speak candidly. The couples were asked to be interviewed together; however, when this was not possible, one individual from the couple was interviewed instead. The interviews lasted about 45-60 minutes and were audio recorded to assist with accuracy in their transcription. The interviews were then transcribed by this researcher. All questions used in this study were open-ended and worded in as neutral a way as possible. Questions were also formatted to include discussion points taken from the literature review, for example, those asking about the overall transition to parenthood. The interviews included questions regarding marriage and the transition to parenthood. The questions remained open-ended and the couples had further opportunities to expand on their thoughts and insights regarding this topic. Questions also included ones suggested by Williams, Edwards, Patterson, & Chamow (2011) from their book, *Essential Assessment Skills for Couple and Family*

*Therapists.* The questions asked the couples about how their relationship has changed now that they have become parents (as well as about how it has stayed the same); how they keep the relationship a priority; how they came to make value-based decisions, using the examples of future plans for the child and finally, how their own family background influences their parenting skills. The couples were also asked about basic demographic questions regarding age and how long they have been married. These were just some examples of the ten questions that were asked in this study.

#### *Data Analysis*

The analysis approach used for this study included content analysis (Berg & Lune, 2012). “Content Analysis is a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings” (Berg & Lune, 2012) (p. 349). This method includes a coding process where data from the interview are reviewed word for word to find common themes throughout the data (Berg & Lune, 2012). This researcher read through all data from the interviews and found common codes that were later used to format general themes of this study.

## **Findings**

This qualitative study focused on parenting decisions within two particular arenas: protecting the marital dyad (focusing on the couple) and planning for the child's future. This study looked at how implicitly versus explicitly these decisions were made, how they were negotiated by the couple, and how their own family background may have impacted these decisions. This study was completed by interviewing five married couples and one married partner (where a husband did not participate with interview) who were all first-time parents of one child. All of the children were under the age of three. There were eleven participants total. The interview included 10 questions regarding parenthood and marriage. All of the questions were open-ended and participants could disclose as much or as little as they chose to do so. All but one of the interviews were completed within the couples' homes. The other took place at a local restaurant. All of the couples who participated were married at least one year before their child was born.

There were four overarching themes that came from the interviews. These themes include: the experience of transitioning into parenthood, dyad protection, beliefs and values based on family origin, and negotiation of decisions. These four themes will be highlighted in this section of findings.

### Experiencing the Transition to Parenthood

The first theme identified in this study is the experience the couples shared regarding the transition to parenthood. This transition can be overwhelming for both partners and there is no way to know what to really expect until the child is born. The participants openly shared their experiences and expectations they had thought they

anticipated. The question in the interview specifically asked the couples what it was like for them after the first month or so after their child was born. Many of the mothers reported having issues with nursing which seemed to cause the biggest problem with the transition.

A subtheme of this theme would be the amount of support the participants received from their spouse and/or other family members. For the most part the couples reported they were fortunate to have help within the first couple of weeks of their child being born. The couples shared feelings of what it felt like to be parents for the first time. Some of the mothers shared similar difficulties with nursing which caused more stress for them. Many of the couples also reported that by having their spouse present for the first couple of weeks was very helpful and supportive for each other. Most of the couples reported the husband would take on more of the household duties while the wives could focus on feeding routines and recovery from giving birth. Below are some of the responses that highlight this theme.

<b>Table 1- The Experience of Transitioning to Parenthood</b>	
<b>Wives' Responses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>It was pretty crazy, completely different than what I had expected it to be. I expected not to get much sleep and not really knowing what to do when she cries, but actually living through it is another story</i></li> <li>• <i>Functioning on little sleep and breastfeeding was very hard, emotionally hard for sure</i></li> <li>• <i>It was extremely difficult for me because I was very emotional</i></li> <li>• <i>Nursing was a job itself</i></li> <li>• <i>I liked the family time that being a</i></li> </ul>

	<p><i>new parent brought</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>People say when you hit the six week mark you feel the most tired, I felt like we were really getting into our groove after the first month and things got a little easier</i></li> <li>• <i>First two weeks were awesome because we had help</i></li> <li>• <i>My parents were here for 10 days and my husband stayed home for 2 solid weeks, because of this it was a smooth transition for us</i></li> <li>• <i>I remember it being so overwhelming. I had a hard time breastfeeding and found myself consumed with that. My husband took off time from work which was very helpful</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Husbands' Responses</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I'm not sure what we expected, but it was probably scarier than I thought it would be because she (child) is so vulnerable</i></li> <li>• <i>It was definitely more difficult than it should have been as she (wife) had troubles with her HR department at work which didn't help</i></li> <li>• <i>It was a piece of cake...(laughs)...kidding</i></li> <li>• <i>It was nice because I was home and we had help</i></li> <li>• <i>We knew it was going to be a very different and busy time for us</i></li> <li>• <i>We didn't know what we were getting ourselves into, but we were excited</i></li> </ul>

Transitioning to parenthood brought various responses and reactions from the couples. Although some of the couples expressed anxiety and stress with the transition, they also brought happy and positive feelings as well. One of the mothers interviewed summed it up best when she stated, *“On the flip side the elation of it was much higher too. The nerves and all of that stuff was heightened, but also the overwhelming love and attachment immediately is overwhelming.”* Transitioning to parenthood is different for each couple, but there are still ways in which they also share similar experiences.

### Dyad Protection

The next theme that emerged from the interviews conducted was the protection of the marital dyad. The couples were asked how they as a couple stay connected after they have had a child. Most of the participants report having alone time in the evening when their child goes to bed. Others plan date nights in and out of the home. One wife describes adding weekly date nights to their chart they having hanging in their kitchen. Both wives and husbands report having to schedule date nights with one another to nurture and maintain their marriage. Protecting the marital dyad seemed to be important throughout all of the relationships. Although each of the couples gave different ways in which they stay connected, the similarity was that it needs to be intentional now that they are parents. Before their children came they had each other and keeping one another a priority wasn't identified as a problem or maybe even questioned. Now that the couple has become a triad most report that balancing marriage has become another important task added to their relationship. Most of the couples reported that they didn't think making time for one another would be something new in their transition to parenthood,

but they realize the importance of keeping their marriage a priority. The table below highlights some of the couples' responses to the question asked.

<b>Table 2- Dyad Protection: Intentionality and Planning</b>	
<b>Wives' Responses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Yeah, we have to put a lot more planning going into alone for me and my husband.</i></li> <li>• <i>We have that alone time in the evening</i></li> <li>• <i>We made this chart on the wall because we needed to actually do it. We weren't focusing on each other and we put date night on there once a week. We didn't have to be so obvious when it was just us together, but now that we are parents we have to be</i></li> <li>• <i>We connect and talk about the day and I think we do a good job at that. We do have to work at being intentional though</i></li> <li>• <i>I feel like we do a lot more home dates. Sitting down for dinner together and watching TV together. We have started having friends over for date nights as well</i></li> <li>• <i>Um, dinner together every night at the table is a big deal in our home. We check in with each other. We carry a good dialogue when trying to figure out parenting things. We are very open to each other's ideas</i></li> <li>• <i>We want and need to be deliberate and intentional to date again</i></li> </ul>

<p><b>Husbands' Responses</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>We have Friday sex night...(laughs)</i></li> <li>• <i>We schedule dates and babysitters</i></li> <li>• <i>We make time and make it work</i></li> <li>• <i>I didn't realize how much extra work needs to go into us. You have to really focus on your relationship</i></li> <li>• <i>We are doing a marriage seminar where you do a lot of talking with one another and then small group work. It's once a week and I think it's what we decided to do for lent, but I also think it's what we needed to do with each other. Putting time into our marriage and relationship</i></li> <li>• <i>I think (son's name) has gotten easier and we have become a little less uptight. And this has made dating easier. We need to start thinking about it again and making it intentional</i></li> </ul>
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Some of the couples reported when they became parents, their marriage changed as it was no longer just the two of them. One of the mothers interviewed was very honest and described the struggle she had with becoming a mother and maintaining her role as a wife. She stated, *“Regarding marriage I feel like it isn't as important as it was before. Parenting has now taken priority and trumps marriage. It is now all about the kids.”* She reported feeling like her attention has now turned to her child and takes up most of her time. She reported that she suspects once her children are a bit older she will be able to focus again on her marriage.

Beliefs and Values Based on Family Origin

Another theme that emerged from the interviews conducted was beliefs and values based on family origin. The couples were asked how their own beliefs and values were shaped by their families of origin. The researcher of this project was specifically interested in finding out whether or not the couples' families may or may have not influenced the ways which they parent. The main similarity between all the couples was the importance of extended family support and involvement. Many of the couples reported that while growing up they learned to value the importance of family time, not just within their immediate family, but with their extended family as well. Many shared fond memories of family holidays or time spent with their grandparents and cousins. Most of the couples reported that they too will raise their children with the value of the family. Another similarity from this theme was the importance of religion and faith. Many of the couples reported that their own beliefs and values surrounding religion were instilled while they were young. Many plan on raising their children with the same religious background they grew up with. The table below bests describes the couples' responses to the question regarding beliefs and values based on family origin.

<b>Table 3- Beliefs and Values Based on Family Origin</b>	
<b>Wives' Responses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Since day one I remember things coming out of my mouth and thinking 'oh my gosh, how did my mom get into my head'. Um, most things with her come straight from my mom, her mom, you know I can see that whole line. I think we grew up in fairly different households and I see that in our parenting style</i></li> <li>• <i>Well, my parents are still together and I have siblings who are very close. I want that for my own</i></li> </ul>

	<p><i>family you know?!</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I used to camp with my family and vacations together and we want. We want to uphold family traditions as well. I grew up close to my extended family and want that for our son.</i></li> <li>• <i>Our mom was the bread winner in our family and our dad was the one who got us off to school in the morning and back from school and worked part-time. That shaped my idea that there is no right way, so I don't have to work full-time and I don't have to work out of the home. There is nothing that I have to do. That shaped that I am free to make that decision about parenting</i></li> <li>• <i>I think our families of origin valued similar things like, both being raised Catholic and coming from active Catholic homes. Family is very important to us</i></li> <li>• <i>I think they are shaped and hugely influenced and in some ways I want to cling to the way my parents did it. And there would be some ways where I would be like eh...I don't want to do it that way. So I have had both reactions with my family. I don't know you would have any other frame of reference if that is what you knew growing up</i></li> <li>• <i>My parents gave me space to explore interests and see what I wanted to do. I expect to do the same with my kids. I don't think it will do them any good to be too inflexible and strict. I think it is important for them to understand limits and boundaries. I think it is also important that my son has a</i></li> </ul>
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	<p><i>religious education. I think this will help him make those important choices in life. I think it is also important for him to have a community he feels like he belongs to. It is important for us that our children have involvement with extended family and have frequent contact with them like we had growing up</i></p>
<p><b>Husbands' Responses</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>I come from a somewhat a broken family, so I want the same thing she wants because I didn't have that. We agree a lot on things like eating dinner at the table together every night and things like that</i></li> <li>• <i>My dad, he was a workaholic and was assistant fire chief on the fire department. He worked crazy hours and was just not home very much and my mom worked quite a bit too. (Wife's name) and I have talked about the fact that the relationship I have with my dad isn't what I want and I mean I love my dad, we get along well, but that relationship isn't the kind of relationship I want to have with my kids. I want to have a different type of relationship with them. Um, you know I think that from that perspective there are things I love and we bring into our family here and there are other things that I recognize that I don't want that aspect of it. One things we have talked about it is that I have all these cousins we hung out with when we were little after church we would all go to grandma's and grandpa's house. (Wife's name) and I have talked about moving closer to family where we have that type of relationship that our kids can be close to their cousins and</i></li> </ul>

	<p><i>other family members</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Let's see, well a lot of what I bring to my parenting, I have seen my parents do. Like her staying home to care for our child is what my mother did when I was brought up</i></li> <li>• <i>I think our families are similar in the big way with the Catholic thing, which impacts our parenting values. I would also say family support. Our extended family is very close and supportive to us</i></li> <li>• <i>I would say there are some things that I want to bring to my family and there are things that are not good examples and I won't be bringing to my own family</i></li> </ul>
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Also noted during this theme was that some couples really wanted to break away from their own family of origin and start a new family with their child. Below are two important quotations from different partners of the couples sharing their thoughts about this. One of the husbands stated, *“I think after we got married we really found our own personality between the two of us and there was great growth. Now with (son's name) I think we do realize that we are our own family. And he will be his own person. The way to thrive isn't to stuff yourself in a box however good it may have worked for us or for anyone else. The best way is to find your own way with parenting.”* It was important for this father that he starts his own family and begins with new traditions, values, and beliefs.

A wife stated, *“We had awesome parents, we aren't trying to criticize their parenting, but just some of the ways they did things don't really work for us. Since*

*having him we have really found that we need to form our own family and break away from our extended family a bit to find our own way as a family.”* She understood the importance of family, but also recognized she needed to be with her husband and child to start a journey of their own. There were definitely connections between beliefs and values shaped by family origins. The couples took away what they wanted to from their own family of origin and have now started raising their children in some similar ways.

Participants also discussed that they were raised differently and can see this in their parenting style. One of the wives reported she came from a family background where if there was an issue, it was discussed right away, and moved on then and there. Her husband on the other hand was raised differently where they didn't resolve issues right away as they took time to process what happened and then went back to deal with it later. This couple reports that they have to meet in the middle and find a common ground to meet and discuss issues.

### Negotiation of Decisions

The final theme that emerged from the interviews conducted was the negotiation of decisions made by the couple regarding their child. This researcher was interested in finding out how couples negotiate and agree upon decisions made regarding their child. The couple was asked in what ways do they as a couple decide future plans for their child, such as education, sports, and other activities and if so, when was the decision made. All of the couples who participated had at least one child under the age of three. While there weren't too many decisions made by the couples regarding their child's future plans, decisions were still being made in other areas. Similarly, the most common decision discussed, planned, and negotiated about the child was who would care for them

once both parents returned to work. Daycare was the topic most talked about during the interviews where the couples reported having to make that first important decision regarding their child’s future. Couples also talked about school and were actually having conversations about things before they were pregnant. The table below highlights some of the response from the couples.

<b>Table 4- Negotiation of Decisions</b>	
<b>Wives’ Responses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>We have discussed minimally about school. Do we want her to go to a Montessori or a bi-lingual school</i></li> <li>• <i>As far as expectations about her as a person goes we have similar views on that. We did talk about while we were pregnant. Um, so I would say to know where you stand on that and to have a discussion with your partner of what you want for this child and what if that doesn’t happen. You have to be open to the unexpected</i></li> <li>• <i>We also talked a lot about daycare and what that was going to be like, whether in-home or Montessori. We were definitely having those conversations before and while I was pregnant</i></li> <li>• <i>Yeah we talked about that (religion) and how we wanted him to be raised. Um, it was important to me that he have a strong faith based background because that is how I grew up. We talked about it before I was pregnant and then a lot more when I was actually pregnant</i></li> <li>• <i>The only conversation I remember</i></li> </ul>

	<p><i>is don't make me be the only disciplinarian. I remember saying that and him being like, oh okay</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>We talked a little about discipline I would say. Still not a ton, we haven't really um I mean emerged into that yet because we really don't discipline her quite yet. Um, you know kinda talk about like how were we disciplined in our upbringing, but no final decisions have been made</i></li> <li>• <i>I think all the decisions we have made have all come from a consensus. That is our goal to agree. I feel like when we disagree we pray about it and ask for guidance to make the right decision</i></li> <li>• <i>I tend to do background research and gather info. We will talk about things and I kinda present what I know. We decide what will work for us and move forward with that decision. This has especially applied to potty training and sleeping habits. We figure out what works for us and compromise those decisions. We will let our kids try different sports and let them try to see what they want to do as an individual</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>Husbands' Responses</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>We haven't really planned anything like that except for daycare, picking the daycare would be the only thing</i></li> <li>• <i>I think we talked about religion</i></li> <li>• <i>I think the other thing about it is that we pray about it. We both put a lot of value on our faith and our God. And when we have big decisions like that I think that we both really value praying about it. We talk about it and really talk it</i></li> </ul>

	<p><i>through. We know whatever we decide the Lord will bless that decision. I don't think we have yet finalized anything like that besides daycare right? (asks wife) Daycare has been tough for sure. We had a friend has done it in the past and now another friend is doing it. You know those are tough decisions to make. Communicating is key for us and being able to be honest and open our concerns and views with each other even if their not always logical or valid, but knowing that we can talk to each other openly about it and pray about it together. We will come to a decision some way</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>We actually most recently started talking about school. Not a lot, but more about schools um like private versus public because I went to private school growing up and I went to school here (in cities). And (name) went to school in an different country</i></li> <li>• <i>We definitely give it to the Lord. I can't think of a time where we haven't given it to him and asked him to help our path. It's not always the same way either</i></li> </ul>
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A subtheme also emerged from negotiation of decisions. Many of the couples reported turning to their faith when making important life decisions regarding their children and their marriage. All couples discussed the importance of communication and honesty. Whether they agree or disagree, decisions must be made with respect. This was an important piece to their marriages as it is beneficial to be open to each other's ideas

and points of view. One of the husbands summed it up well when he said, “*When my wife and I are good, our marriage is good, and that is even better for our daughter.*”

### Conclusion

Marriage definitely changes when a couple transitions into parenthood according to these couples and the individual interviewed. These findings were just some examples of how these changes can affect the marital dyad. It is important to recognize the transition couples make into parenthood as each experience is unique and can be challenging. There are still ways in which the experience is universal for some parents, especially mothers, when it comes to feeding issues. It is no surprise that marriages definitely change when the couple becomes parents. The dynamic of the couple is different as they are now responsible for caring for their child. Most of the couples reported that maintaining and prioritizing their marriage has to be *intentional* now. Before it was not as difficult to keep it a priority and have that quality time together.

Couples are recognizing how their own families of origin have shaped them with becoming who they are today and how they want to incorporate those beliefs and values into their new family. Some of the couples plan on continuing those beliefs and values, while others plan to find their own ways. Making decisions are difficult enough when married or in a relationship, but adding children to the mix can be even more difficult. The couples shared ways in which they have discussed, planned, and negotiated decisions regarding their children. Although many of the couples' children are young, they still reported having to make difficult decisions that took a lot of communicating and

negotiating in order to come to a mutual understanding. These are skills which will further help these parents along the long journey of parenthood.

### **Discussion**

Overall, the four themes that emerged from this study gave more in-depth perceptions and descriptions about how married couples focus on parenting decisions regarding their child and at the same time protecting their marital dyad. Those themes included: the experience of transitioning into parenthood, dyad protection, beliefs and values based on family of origin, and negotiation of decisions. All themes identified in this study provided valuable insight as to what it was like for some married first-time parents as they went through the experience. The researcher of this study found a strong correlation between the themes presented in this study and the literature reviewed. There were many sources of literature that had previously researched topics such as: first-time parenting, gender roles and division of labor, marital satisfaction, and family background (Lindahl, Clements, & Markman, 1997; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000; Kluwer, Heesink, & Vliert, 2002; Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003; Singley & Hynes, 2005; Ahlborg & Strandmark, 2006; Bartell, 2006; Larossa & Sinha, 2006; Houts, Barnett-Walker, Paley, & Cox, 2008; Deave & Johnson, 2008; Botha, van den Berg, & Venter, 2009; Curran, Hazen, & Mann, 2009; Kovunen, Rothaupt, & Wolfgram, 2009; Katz-Wise, Priess, & Hyde, 2010; Petersen, 2011). Although previous research had been completed regarding these arenas, there was not very much research found about how parents negotiate and make decisions regarding their child. This discussion section will describe interpretations of the findings for this

study, the, strengths and limitations of this study, implications for social work practice, and implications for future research.

### *Experiencing the Transition to Parenthood*

All participants shared different responses regarding the transition to parenthood, but similarly all shared feelings of stress, anxiety, and other mixed feelings that came with becoming parents. The participants also described the intense feelings of love and attachment to their child from the moment they were born. Some of the couples reported feeling this way as they recognized their child was a part of both themselves and their spouse. LaRossa & Sinha (2006) discuss the importance of parents taking time to recognize the positives with the new experience of parenthood as it can also become overbearing for the first-time parents to only discuss the negative feelings and stress that is involved with becoming a parent. Though the couples shared the fear and anxiety that came along with transitioning to parenthood, they also shared the positive feelings they experienced as well which seemed to help deal with the newness of becoming parents. The description of this attachment also highlights the importance of this early period in supporting initial attachment between parent and child.

Participants also shared that they felt it was most important to have the extra support present after the birth of their child. Some of the couples had their parents come and stay with them during the transition. Other couples reported just by having the other spouse present and available to help seemed to ease the transition a little more. Responsibilities were shared between spouses and other family members who came to help the new parents out. Participants reported by having the support of the other spouse

and/or family members, they didn't feel like all the new responsibilities of the child were theirs alone.

### *Dyad Protection*

Becoming a first-time parent affects each partner in the marriage, but also changes the dynamic of the marital dyad. Each parent has to identify with their new role as a parent, but has to also maintain and adjust in their new roles within their marriage. Marital satisfaction has been known to decrease when couples become first-time parents. All of the participants of this study discussed the importance of keeping their relationship a priority and staying connected. Many of the participants described that since becoming parents, they now have to be more intentional about keeping their marriage a priority. Before they became parents it was just the two partners and they didn't necessarily have to be as intentional as they reported spending time together most of the time. They had quality alone time together and didn't have to think in the same way about going out on dates or making time for each other. Couples reported this changed once they became parents. Many participants reported scheduling date nights weekly. One couple even added weekly date nights to their family calendar. All of the couples expressed appreciation for the alone time they get once their child goes to bed at night. Participants were universal about the importance of this time together.

A study completed by Ahlborg & Strandmark (2006) reported that couples interviewed in their study stressed the importance of maintaining focus on the couple. This should be a goal of both partners involved in order to maintain marriage satisfaction. The couples need to find ways to focus on their child as well as nurturing their marriage by finding couple time. Participants' answers varied when asked how they stay

connected. Answers differed between the participants' genders. Women responded that they stay connected by planning alone time and date nights, hanging out with other friends, etc. Some of the men responded differently when asked how they stay connected. One husband in particular reported that he and his wife schedule *Friday sex night*, while the others reported just making it work to spend time together. It appears that men also focus on the sexual relationship as much as spending time together. The sexual relationship could also be a form of spending time with their spouse. One participant reported she doesn't feel as connected to her husband as her primary focus is their child. She suspects this will change once her child is old enough to care for himself and the focus can shift back to the marriage again.

#### *Beliefs and Values Based on Family Origin*

Curran, Hazen, & Mann (2009) state, "Couples' expectations about marriage are likely to be shaped by their observations of the marital relationship they grew up with, that is, their own parents' marriage or relationship" (p.2). The participants shared similar responses when they were asked if their own beliefs and values were shaped by their families of origin. The participants reported the importance of extended family support and involvement. Most participants shared stories about how much fun they had with extended family growing up. The participants wanted this for their children as well. It is important for them to ensure their children have this experience as well. Another important finding was the similarity of religion and faith. Many of the participants reported having these values instilled when they were growing up. Many of the couples plan on raising their children with the same set of values and family traditions.

Some of the participants were also very intentional with what they plan on bringing into their new family from their family of origin. Some of the participants reported that although they had good parents, there were examples of things they would not bring to their new family. One of the participants reported that he doesn't plan on having the same relationship with his child that he had with his own father. His father worked a lot outside of the home and wasn't always available. He doesn't want that to happen with his own children.

Participants have learned from their own family origin what they want to be like in their own new family. Some of the participants reported that it is important for them to break away from their family of origin and start new family values, beliefs, and traditions within their new family. It was important for some of the participants to begin a new journey with just their spouse and their child. Again, they are being intentional with what they want to bring to their new family.

#### *Negotiation of Decisions*

Although all of the participants have young children under the age of three, couples were still having discussions and negotiating decisions about their children. The most common topic discussed was daycare for their child. This researcher found that couples were having discussions about their children before the child was even born. Many participants identified care for their child as the first real important decision made about their child. Participants also report they were having discussions about their child's schooling before their child was born. Discussions and negotiation of these important decisions started early on and were important for the couples to have these conversations.

A subtheme was identified when discussing the negotiation of decisions. Some of the participants reported they often turn to their faith when making these important life decisions about their child and the family. They also discussed the importance of communication. Participants reported that they had thought they communicated a lot before becoming parents, but once their child was born they started communicating even more. Participants reported that even though they may disagree, there is a need for mutual respect when making decisions. Many of the couples reported that they work as a team more than anything since becoming parents. All of the themes identified in this study provide valuable insight as to what it is like for married couples transitioning to parenthood.

### **Connection to Conceptual Framework**

The findings of this study fit well with the conceptual framework of structural family therapy. Aponte (1994) discusses the importance of negotiating values within the family. He states that the value systems are important to the family and the clinician working with the family. First-time parents may base their parenting decisions on values they learned growing up. Participants in this study shared that they had planned to raise their children with the same values and beliefs they learned as a child. Many participants reported that religion and faith were instilled while they were growing up. This was especially important to the participants that they carry these values of religion and faith into their own new family. Participants of this study also discussed the importance of family traditions such as having extended family involvement and support and upholding family activities. Aponte (1994) stresses the importance of families finding their own family value system. People learn values from their own family of origin, whether

positive or negative. It is up to the new family system to decide which values and beliefs they will carry over and/or create within their new family. This is quite consistent with what participants in this study described.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

Marriage and the transition to parenthood can be an exciting time for a couple. It can also be a very overwhelming experience as well. The marital dyad they were once used to being now has completely different dynamics once a child is born. There are added responsibilities, less time for each other and other things, and more demands overall. Though each partner is going through the same transition into parenthood, they are each experiencing it differently. Participants of this study were very open and shared what that initial experience felt like when they became parents. Many participants reported that the transition wasn't what they had expected it to be. The transition took time getting used to now being a triad family system. Couples had to learn new routines and make adjustments, all while maintaining their relationship as well.

Some couples may need help from the outside professional world while going through this life-changing event of becoming parents. There is no manual out there that can prepare couples with what reality will be like once their child is born. Couples may find that they need an outlet they can use to help throughout the journey of marriage and parenthood.

Social workers as therapists may find themselves having couples come in to see them to get help with various marriage and family issues. Some of the participants in this study reported that they have already sought help with working through some of their issues with parenting. They needed an outside neutral person to work through some

parenting issues they were experiencing. Parenting can also affect the marriage and sometimes couples may need help working through certain issues.

It is important for social workers to understand how the role of first-time parents affects the marital dyad and the child. Social workers may work with couples and families through many facets. Social workers need to be knowledgeable about family systems overall. Clinicians may see the marital couple at a time when they are in disagreement about parenting decisions or ways in which they are trying to merge two different family backgrounds into their own family. These are just some examples of what the clinician may see.

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

Strengths of this study included the in-person engagement from the married couples during the interviews. Out of the six interviews completed, five included both partners. All of the interviews conducted with the couples were in their homes. The couples appeared to be very relaxed and interacted quite a bit with one another. The questions asked were responded to by both husband and wife. There wasn't one partner dominating the interview which enhanced the experience that much more. Although the participants all had children under the age of three, there was a variety of parenting experiences and skills shared during the interviews. Participants voluntarily shared and offered honest experiences regarding their marriages and parenting.

A limitation of this study was only including married couples for the interviews. This limited other possible couple experiences from people who were not married from participating in the study. Another limitation is that only first-time parents of children under six years old were asked to participate in this study. This limited the input for this

study from different parents who have more than one child and/or older children. Another limitation was the lack of diversity among the couples. This researcher only interviewed married heterosexual couples for study purposes only and did not include same-sex married couples. The researcher of this study had to narrow the parental population to a specific group as it was so broad. The final limitation noted was that all of the participants who were interviewed had children under the age of three. This limited the amount of negotiation and decision-making regarding their child's future as they reported they did not yet have to make many decisions about their child. Some of the relevant dynamics here may simply emerge later.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Participants in this study openly shared their experiences with marriage and parenthood. While there is a lot of research out there regarding these two topics, more research should be done to find how couples negotiate and discuss their child's future. Participants in this study shared their experiences thus far with making decisions regarding their children, however, their children were all less than three years old. Further research could also provide insight as to how parents of older children make these important life decisions about their children. It would also be interesting to find how those decisions parents make about their child affects them later in life. Future research could include studies where researchers follow those children and parents throughout childhood into adulthood to see how those decisions impacted them.

Parenthood and marriage will continue to be a longstanding tradition in society. There will continue to be ways in which future research can be beneficial to both topics. Marriage will always impact parenthood and vice versa.

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## Appendix A

### Agency CONSENT FORM

Researcher: Please provide your agency with the information about your project and have your agency contact complete this form.

Agency: Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to allow this study to take place at your agency. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

<b>Project Name</b>	From Dyad to Triad: Parental Negotiation of First-Time Parents	<b>IRB Tracking Number</b>	412088-1
<b>General Information Statement about the study:</b>			
This study will look to see how married couples who are first-time parents negotiate and make decisions regarding their child. This study will also look at how the couple protects the marital dyad during the transition to parenthood.			
Your agency is invited to participate in this research. The agency was selected as a host for this study because:			
You are the owner of an in-home daycare facility. Most of your daycare families have one child under the age of six. You have agreed to allow this researcher the opportunity to recruit participants at your facility via invitation letters.			
Study is being conducted by:		Danielle Yanez, LSW	
Research Advisor (if applicable):		David Roseborough, Ph.D., LICSW	
Department Affiliation:		Social Work	
<b>Background Information</b>			
The purpose of the study is:			
The purpose of this study is to look at how married couples who are first-time parents negotiate and make decisions regarding their child. This study will focus on the arena of planning for their child's future as well as protecting the marital dyad. The study will look at how implicitly versus explicitly these decisions are made, how they are negotiated by the couple, and how their own family background may impact these decisions.			
<b>Procedures</b>			
Study participants will be asked to do the following: <i>State specifically what the subjects will be doing, including if they will be performing any tasks. Include any information about assignment to study groups, length of time for participation, frequency of procedures, audio taping, etc.</i>			
If participants agree to participate in this study, this researcher will ask them to complete an interview that will last approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will consist of 10 questions			

<p>pertaining to the transition to parenthood. They will agree to have the interview be audio recorded and agree to allow this researcher to transcribe the interview data. They will also agree to allow this researcher to present the findings in a public dissemination of this clinical research study at the University of St. Thomas in May, 2013. The results of what participants say during the interview may be discussed during this research presentation, but this researcher will not identify any information about them or this daycare facility. Participants can withdraw up to a week after the interview is completed if they contact this researcher and their information will not be used.</p>
<p><b>Risks and Benefits of being in the study</b></p>
<p>The risks involved for subjects participating in the study are:</p>
<p>There are no known risks involved in participating in this research study.</p>
<p>The direct benefits the agency will receive for allowing the study are:</p>
<p>A direct benefit to participants participating in this study will be a \$10 gift card to Caribou Coffee offered after the interview is completed.</p>
<p><b>Compensation</b></p>
<p>Details of compensation (if and when disbursement will occur and conditions of compensation) include:</p>
<p>N/A</p>
<p><b>Confidentiality</b></p>
<p>The records of this study will be kept confidential. The types of records, who will have access to records and when they will be destroyed as a result of this study include:</p>
<p>The transcripts used for this study will be stored on this researcher's home computer which is password protected. Only this researcher has the password and the transcripts will only be accessed by this researcher. Audio recordings, consent forms, field notes, and printed transcripts will remain in a locked file box at this researcher's home. Only this researcher will have keys to access the locked file box. All audio recordings will be deleted on May 20th, 2013 from personal audio recorder used. Consent forms will be destroyed on May 20th, 2013. Printed transcripts will be kept indefinitely, but will not have any identifying information on them. Participants will not be identified on the recorded interviews and will be identified only by numbers in the transcripts (couple #1, #2, etc.). The owner of this daycare facility will not have any knowledge of who may or may not have chosen to participate in this study.</p>
<p><b>Voluntary Nature</b></p>
<p>Allowing the study to be conducted at your agency is entirely voluntary. By agreeing to allow the study, you confirm that you understand the nature of the study and who the participants will be and their roles. You understand the study methods and that the researcher will not proceed with the study until receiving approval from the UST Institutional Review Board. If this study is intended to be published, you agree to that. You understand the risks and benefits to your organization.</p>

Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you		will NOT be used in the study	
<b>Contacts and Questions</b>			
You may contact any of the resources listed below with questions or concerns about the study.			
Researcher name	Danielle Yanez, LSW		
Researcher email			
Researcher phone			
Research Advisor name	David Roseborough, Ph.D., LICSW		
Research Advisor email			
Research Advisor phone			
UST IRB Office			
<b>Statement of Consent</b>			
I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I consent to allow the study to be conducted at the agency I represent. By checking the electronic signature box, I am stating that I understand what is being asked of me and I give my full consent.			
Signature of Agency Representative <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Electronic signature</i>		Date	
Print Name of Agency Representative			
Signature of Researcher <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Electronic signature*</i>		Date	
Print Name of Researcher			

\*Electronic signatures certify that::

The signatory agrees that he or she is aware of the polities on research involving participants of the University of St. Thomas and will safeguard the rights, dignity and privacy of all participants.

- The information provided in this form is true and accurate.
- The principal investigator will seek and obtain prior approval from the UST IRB office for any substantive modification in the proposal, including but not limited to changes in cooperating investigators/agencies as well as changes in procedures.
- Unexpected or otherwise significant adverse events in the course of this study which may affect the risks and benefits to participation will be reported in writing to the UST IRB office and to the subjects.
- The research will not be initiated and subjects cannot be recruited until final approval is granted.

## Appendix B

### CONSENT FORM

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to participate in the study.

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

<b>Project Name</b>	From Dyad to Triad: Parental Negotiation of First-Time Parents	<b>IRB Tracking Number</b>	412088-1]
<b>General Information Statement about the study:</b>			
This researcher is conducting a study to see how married couples who are first-time parents negotiate and make decisions regarding their child. This study will also look at how the couple protects the marital dyad during the transition to parenthood.			
You are invited to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant for this study because: you are married and have a child under the age of six years old.			
Study is being conducted by:	Danielle Yanez, LSW		
Research Advisor (if applicable):	David Roseborough, Ph.D., LICSW		
Department Affiliation:	Social Work		
<b>Background Information</b>			
The purpose of the study is:			
This study will specifically look at ways married couples negotiate similarly and/or differently when they become first-time parents. This study is important as it involves the whole family system. This study will provide a variety of experiences from married couples who have transitioned into parenthood. While there is a variety of research already completed regarding first-time parents, there is little regarding potential parental negotiation. This study is important to the field as social workers will continue to be needed to work with married couples and families. It is important for social workers to understand how the role of first-time parents affects the couple and the child.			
<b>Procedures</b>			
If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to do the following: <i>State specifically what the subjects will be doing, including if they will be performing any tasks. Include any information about assignment to study groups, length of time for participation, frequency of procedures, audio taping, etc.</i>			
If you agree to participate in this study, this researcher will ask you to participate in an interview			

<p>that will last approximately 45-60 minutes. The interview will consist of 10 questions pertaining to the transition to parenthood. You will agree to have the interview be audio recorded and agree to allow me to transcribe the interview data. You will also agree to allow this researcher to present the findings in a public dissemination of this clinical research study at the University of St. Thomas in May, 2013. The results of what you say during the interview may be discussed during this research presentation, but this researcher will not identify any information about you or the daycare facility. Participants can withdraw up to a week after the interview is completed if they contact this researcher and their information will not be used.</p>
<p><b>Risks and Benefits of being in the study</b></p>
<p>The risks involved for participating in the study are:</p>
<p>There are no known risks involved in participating in this research study.</p>
<p>The direct benefits you will receive from participating in the study are:</p>
<p>A direct benefit to participating in this study will be a \$10 gift card to Caribou Coffee offered after the interview is completed.</p>
<p><b>Compensation</b></p>
<p>Details of compensation (if and when disbursement will occur and conditions of compensation) include:</p>
<p><i>Note:</i> In the event that this research activity results in an injury, treatment will be available, including first aid, emergency treatment and follow-up care as needed. Payment for any such treatment must be provided by you or your third party payer if any (such as health insurance, Medicare, etc.).</p>
<p>N/A</p>
<p><b>Confidentiality</b></p>
<p>The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report published, information will not be provided that will make it possible to identify you in any way. The types of records, who will have access to records and when they will be destroyed as a result of this study include:</p>
<p>The transcripts used for this study will be stored on this researcher's home computer which is password protected. Only this researcher has the password and the transcripts will only be accessed by this researcher. Audio recordings, consent forms, field notes, and printed transcripts will remain in a locked file box at this researcher's home. Only this researcher will have keys to access the locked file box. All audio recordings will be deleted on May 20th, 2013 from personal audio recorder used. Consent forms will be destroyed on May 20th, 2013. Printed transcripts will be kept indefinitely, but will not have any identifying information on them. Participants will not be identified on the recorded interviews and will be identified only by numbers in the transcripts (couple #1, #2, etc.). The owner of this daycare facility will not have any knowledge of who may or may not have chosen to participate in this study.</p>
<p><b>Voluntary Nature of the Study</b></p>

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with any cooperating agencies or institutions or the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until the date\time specified in the study.  
 You are also free to skip any questions that may be asked unless there is an exception(s) to this rule listed below with its rationale for the exception(s).

N/A

Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you	will NOT be used in the study
---	-------------------------------

**Contacts and Questions**

You may contact any of the resources listed below with questions or concerns about the study.

Researcher name	Danielle Yanez, LSW
Researcher email	
Researcher phone	
Research Advisor name	David Roseborough, Ph.D., LICSW
Research Advisor email	
Research Advisor phone	
UST IRB Office	

**Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I am at least 18 years old. I consent to participate in the study. By checking the electronic signature box, I am stating that I understand what is being asked of me and I give my full consent to participate in the study.

Signature of Study Participant <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Electronic signature</i>		Date	
Print Name of Study Participant			

Signature of Parent or Guardian (if applicable) <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Electronic Signature</i>		Date	
Print Name of Parent or Guardian (if applicable)			

Signature of Researcher <input type="checkbox"/> <i>Electronic signature*</i>		Date	
Print Name of Researcher			

- \*Electronic signatures certify that::  
 The signatory agrees that he or she is aware of the polities on research involving participants of the University of St. Thomas and will safeguard the rights, dignity and privacy of all participants.
- The information provided in this form is true and accurate.
  - The principal investigator will seek and obtain prior approval from the UST IRB office for any substantive modification in the proposal, including but not limited to changes in cooperating investigators/agencies as well as changes in procedures.
  - Unexpected or otherwise significant adverse events in the course of this study which may affect the risks and benefits to participation will be reported in writing to the UST IRB office and to the subjects.
  - The research will not be initiated and subjects cannot be recruited until final approval is granted.

## Appendix C

### Interview Questions

- 1) How long have you been married and when did you have your first born child? Did you discuss/plan/negotiate any of these arenas (school, future plans for your child) before your child's birth? If so, how when and how?
- 2) What was it like for you both during the month or so after having your child?
- 3) Have your roles within the relationship changed? And how have they stayed the same?
- 4) Did your expectations about marriage and parenthood change after your child was born?
- 5) How would you say your relationship changed after your child was born?
- 6) How do you as a couple stay connected after having your child?
- 7) In what ways do you as a couple decide future plans for your child, such as education, sports, and other activities? Is there a time when decisions were made?
- 8) How are your beliefs and values about parenting shaped by your families of origin?
- 9) How do you as a couple balance your marriage and being parents? What has been the biggest surprise?
- 10) Do you have any advice for other first-time parents in relation to (1) keeping your relationship important and (2) negotiating values (e.g. in the form of making important decisions, such as thinking about your child's future)?