

## CONJUGALITY AND PARENTHOOD FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE WOMEN HOUSEHOLDERS<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT.** It is a qualitative study that aimed to understand the issues that underlie the end of the marriage relationship and the parenthood performed post-dissolution as well as to understand the differences attributed to the performance of the parental roles under the eyes of the women householders. The study included ten women, who are mothers, from lower class groups and that made a single-parent family. Among them, seven were single, one separated and two divorced. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups and were analyzed according to the assumptions of the thematic content analysis. The results pointed to a marital separation experience, in which the partners transfer the conflicts to the relationship with their children. In addition, we evidenced the importance of overcoming some paradigms related to the motherhood and the fatherhood, dissolving, in particular, the naturalized perspectives on the mother always be the best caregiver while the father is secondary in relation to his children.

**Keywords:** Marital separation; parenthood; women.

## CONJUGALIDADE E PARENTALIDADE NA PERSPECTIVA DE MULHERES CHEFES DE FAMÍLIA

**RESUMO.** O presente estudo é de caráter qualitativo e teve como objetivo compreender as questões que perpassam o fim do relacionamento conjugal, a parentalidade desempenhada após a dissolução bem como as diferenças atribuídas ao desempenho dos papéis parentais sob o olhar de mulheres chefes de família. Participaram do estudo dez mulheres mães que eram provenientes de grupos populares e compunham uma família monoparental. Destas, sete eram solteiras, uma era separada e duas divorciadas. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas e grupos focais e foram analisados seguindo os pressupostos da análise de conteúdo temática. Os resultados apontaram uma vivência na separação conjugal na qual os parceiros transferem conflitos para a relação com os filhos. Além disso, evidenciou-se a importância de ultrapassar alguns paradigmas que permeiam a maternidade e a paternidade, dissolvendo, em especial, as perspectivas naturalizadas em relação ao fato de a mãe ser sempre a melhor cuidadora e o pai ser secundário na relação com os filhos.

**Palavras-chave:** Separação conjugal; parentalidade; mulheres.

## MATRIMONIO Y PARENTALIDAD EN LA PERSPECTIVA DE MUJERES JEFAS DE FAMILIA

**RESUMEN.** Se trata de un estudio cualitativo que tuvo como objetivo comprender las cuestiones que interfieren en el fin de la relación conyugal y la parentalidad realizada post-disolución, además de comprender las diferencias asignadas a la realización de los papeles parentales bajo la mirada de mujeres jefas de familia. Participaron del estudio diez mujeres, madres, provenientes de grupos populares y que eran miembros de una familia monoparental. De éstas, siete eran solteras, una separada y dos divorciadas. Los datos fueron recolectados a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas y grupos focales y se hizo el análisis siguiendo los presupuestos del análisis de contenido temático. Los resultados apuntaron para una experiencia en la separación conyugal, en la que los compañeros transfieren las disputas para la relación con sus hijos. Además de eso, se hizo evidente la importancia de rebasar algunos paradigmas que permean la maternidad y la paternidad, disolviendo, especialmente, las perspectivas naturalizadas en relación a la madre ser siempre la mejor cuidadora y el padre ser secundario en la relación con los hijos.

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**Palabras-clave:** Separación conyugal; parentalidad; mujeres.

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The increase in the number of separations and marital rearrangements is a reality of the national contemporary context (Cano, Gabarra, Moré & Crepaldi, 2009; Grzybowski & Wagner, 2010). In this opportunity, it is understood that increasingly becomes necessary the clarification related to what belongs to the couple's relationship scope and what concerns to the performance of the parental roles (fatherhood and motherhood exercise). This is because this appears to be one of the main difficulties which are faced by post-dissolution former couple. They cannot distinct the parenthood and conjugality experience (Brito, 2014). In this study the term conjugality was used to characterize any affective relationship between couples, not limited to those relations formalized by law.

The term parenthood has spread since 1970, when it began to replace the term paternal authority. Such substitution, from paternal to parenthood, aimed to put the couple on equal conditions regarding the upbringing and education of their children as well as to set the father according to his father quality, providing him to achieve a so-called parental function (Roudinesco, 2003). The term co-parenting, in turn, can be defined as the level of interaction that the father and the mother reported having with each other and how they decide the issues that permeate their children lives (Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000). Even today, these terms are widely referred in studies of psychoanalysis and/or systemic referential and that deal with the issue of the fatherhood and motherhood exercise (Corso & Corso, 2011; Grzybowski & Wagner, 2010).

It is known, however, that the parenthood performed post-separation, considering here the period immediately after the separation and the subsequent experience, will always result in significant differences from that carried out by the couple while living together, since there is a series of reformulations related to the habits and the family routines (Grzybowski & Wagner, 2010; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1998). However, the settling time of each family context seems difficult to predict across the board. This is because the time after separation requires major changes impact, since the children are dealing with the first experiences when living with the separated

parents that can, over time, become less intense as they incorporate to the family routine.

It is clear that with the dissolution of the loving relationship, the former couple will need to experience a new reality in order to maintain a good co-parental relationship. Since the conjugality has currently attributes of transience, that is, the relationships are shorter and unstable, some authors (Corso & Corso, 2011; Décoret, 2001 Padilha, 2008) reinforce the importance that the spouses, in the separation process, have the clarity that the responsibilities of each one in relation to the children do not dissolve with the separation. In other words, the couple realizes themselves in the task of having to create the children even with the end of the marriage relationship (Dolto, 1989/2011; Pereira, 2011).

However, it is not uncommon to see how the conjugality and parenthood can be mixed as well as it can be confused for the former couple, even after the dissolution of the marriage relationship. This is evident in the cases where there is a distance from the parent who does not have the child's custody - mostly men - because of the disagreements and discussions that arise in contact with the ex-partner (Brito, 2007; Cunico & Arpini, 2013) or even in the father's remarriage function (Smith, 2008; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1998).

In general, without aiming to set the time due to the experience of separation, it is observed that many of the difficulties faced by the former couple with the children, is due to the relationship that the couple had during its married life (Décoret 2001, Grzybowski & Wagner, 2010 Padilha, 2008). As an example of this, we have the case of the mothers who increase the children dependency in relation to themselves, while releasing the father help, leaving no room for her partner to invest in the parental relationship during the married life. Yet, after the separation, many of them complain about the little paternal involvement with the children (Reis, 2010).

Obviously, we cannot state that all men, who are fathers and do not engage in the daily care and/or, move away from the contact with the children after the divorce, they do so because they are led to this (Padilha, 2008). However, it is undeniable to realize the great maternal privilege with regard to child custody, and in 2011, 87.64% of the unilaterally guards were granted to the

mother and only 5.33% to the father (IBGE, 2011). Importantly, this number should not be considered in isolation, since there are certainly relationships to be established with the history of women in the Western culture (Roudinesco, 2003) and more recently with the condition of female householders (Carloto, 2005) and the poverty feminization (Novellino & Belchior, 2008).

In any case, one might think that such a scenario still reflects the belief that long remains that the mother is naturally better prepared to care for the children, attributing to his father a peripheral condition. Thus, the failure to comply with the father responsibilities was a naturalized behavior and even accepted under the aegis of the dedication paternal duty (Padilha, 2008). Thus, although some changes are happening, being one of them the growth of women's participation in the labor market - which allows them to be their families providers - it can be seen that such event is not harmonious to the men growth in the domestic life and the care for the children (Freitas et al., 2009).

In this context, it is observed that, although, there is a currently demand in order the men become more involved in the domestic sphere, the motherhood is still surrounded by a series of myths, duties, functions and powers and yet seems to assume a magnitude role when compared to the paternity one (Reis, 2010), whose understanding is reinforced and perpetuated by many women and shared by the society in general (Padilha, 2008; Vieira and Souza, 2010).

The single-parent family can be defined as a family arrangement consisting by the father or the mother, which may be in the single, separated, divorced or widowed condition, added by the children (Pinto et al., 2011). Regarding the women single-parenthood in popular groups, many of these families are not following a divorce or separation, but rather come from an early pregnancy or unplanned, family instability and/or abandonment (Pinto et al., 2011). For this reason, these families are largely associated to situations of economic vulnerability, since the woman assumes not only the home functions and the children care, but also happens to be the provider of the family income. This binding them, often, in low-paid work in part-time or intermittent work (Carloto, 2005; Novellino & Belchior, 2008).

Evidently, other aspects need to be taken into account when working with this family configuration, such as the race and the ethnicity,

participation in support and solidarity networks, the maintained relationship nature - or the lack of it - with the father of her children, in such a way not to fall into a perspective of the women victimization who live in this context (Macedo, 2008). Considering the above scenario, this study sought to understand the issues that underlie the end of the couple's relationship and the parenthood performed post-dissolution, as well as the differences attributed to the performance of the parental roles in the perspective of the female householders who came from popular groups.

## METHOD

### Design

This is a qualitative research, which is defined by Minayo (2012) as a way of working with the universe of the meanings, the motives, the aspirations, the beliefs, the values and the attitudes, in other words, with a level of reality that cannot or should not be quantified. The choice of this research model was due to consider that a qualitative approach is usually used when the researcher believes that to the studied phenomenon or concept there will be many and varied meanings (Creswell, 2010). To Turato (2005), to understand the individual or collective meaning that the people attribute to certain phenomena is to understand what these phenomena mean to them.

### Participants

The study included 10 women, who were mothers and came from popular groups, which made up a single-parent family organization and who were living in an urban outskirts of a town in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul/Brazil State. Mothers' age ranged between 22 and 49 years old, seven of them are singles, one is separated and two are divorced. There was no restriction regarding the participants marital status, but the main criteria is not to be resident with the parent son (s) or another partner. All of them were employed at the time the survey was conducted, and this structure was represented by the most diverse range of professions, such that: waitress, general service assistant, confectioner and attendant, for example. Among the ten participants, four of them did not receive pension food, and among these four, three had already

pursued a lawsuit to request the payment and only one reported to have no interest in receiving the pension for the ex-partner.

### **Instruments and procedures**

Data were collected in two stages. The first time included the conducting of semi-structured interviews, which constitutes an exchange of ideas and meanings, in which both the interviewee and the interviewer are, in different ways, involved in the knowledge production. Its goal regards to "a detailed understanding of the beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to the individuals behaviors in specific social contexts" (Gaskell, 2005, p. 65).

The participants were identified through a consultation in the registration forms from the Centro de Referência de Assistência Social - CRAS (Social Assistance Reference Center) of a city in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul. The women who met the inclusion criteria - being mothers and compose a single-parent family - were contacted by telephone, and the interviews were conducted according to the availability of each one and from a verbal and written consent (signed of the Free Informed Consent Term). All the interviews were conducted individually and once with each participant and occurred in the CRAS dependencies, and they have been recorded and literally transcribed for further analysis.

At the end of this stage, the interviewed mothers were invited to participate in the second phase of the study, in which it was proposed them to hold the focus group. Among the 10 participants, six attended the groups. Thus, there were two meetings containing three mothers in each one. One of the groups was carried out in the CRAS dependencies and the other in the Psychology Department dependencies, from the institution to which the authors are linked. This is because the time that best served the interests of the participants was a time when the CRAS was already closed. The groups had as the trigger two situations problems, which have been prepared based on the analysis of the individual interviews. One of the situations addressed the father's absence after the end of the couple's relationship and the other concerned the occurrence of the pregnancy in an unstable time of the marriage relationship. As the interview, both groups were recorded and entirely transcribed.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were submitted to the thematic content analysis (Bardin, 2011) which was guided by the research objectives. This analysis has a methodological scientific nature as it develops itself in three stages: (1) pre-analysis; (2) material exploration and (3) treatment, inference and interpretation results (Bardin, 2011). Thus, it was initiated by the reading of each individual interview and further in its entirety, comparing one to another. As a result of this first analysis, the problem situations have arisen and they were used as triggers in the focus groups. After the achievement of the groups, there was a reading of the data transcription of each of them separately and then they were analyzed together. Finally, we carried out the analysis of the transcripts interview and the groups together, and the analysis categories emerged.

### **Ethical considerations**

It is noteworthy that during this research, the four basic principles of bioethics were respected: autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence and justice, as pointed out by the Diretrizes e Normas Regulamentadoras de Pesquisa Envolvendo Seres Humanos (Guidelines and Norms Regulating the Research Involving Human Subjects). Considering the confidential nature of the participants identity, the lines will be identified by the letters M (Mother), followed by the number which represents the order of the interviews, and differentiated by the letters I (interview) and G (group).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

From the data analysis, the highlights were the categories named "The parenthood and the conjugality" and "parental roles", which will be described below along with their respective subcategories.

### **Parenthood and the conjugality**

This category is highlighted by scoring the reflections brought by the mothers about the impact of the end of the conjugality in the parenthood exercise. It will be presented by the subcategories: "The father only loves his son while he loves his mother": post-separation

parenthood and "He already has another partner": the new father relationship.

**"The father only loves his son while he loves his mother": post-separation parenthood**

It is known that the marital breakdown should not be treated or considered equivalent to the parental breakdown. However, the maintenance of the parental relationship seems to be closely tied to the relationship kept by the post-separation former couple (Castillo, 2010; King & Heard, 1999). Regarding the study participants, many reported not having a good relationship with her ex-partner, who is hardly present in their children lives. "Very bad ... [the relationship with the former] because we only talk, sometimes, but to fight. Because I impose certain things, I want to put to him and he does not accept, he thinks he's doing the right thing." (M1-I).

In this sense, one might think that the experience of a confrontation separation, with conflicts no elaborated by the couple, the parent who does not have the child custody may deviate from the contact with him - in most cases, the father - in an attempt to avoid contact with the ex-partner (Cunico & Arpini, 2013; Grzybowski & Wagner, 2010). Such statements are intended to clarify that not always the end of the conjugal relationship means the end of the fights and/or disagreements between the couple, leaving their children, often exposed to such disagreements (Brito, 2007). The speech below illustrates this.

*I said "hi son" ... then he [4 year old son] answered like this: "because you do not call me, I do not know what." So his father said "because she's not even think of you, she does not want to know anything about you." So I said "no son, it is not so! Your mother was working, and your mother had no money to put credit on the mobile phone and then your mother could not call you, you cannot leave your father to talk ... do not believe what your father says, this is not true. The mother loves you, and then he said "okay mom, okay mom." Then he said "Dad is crazy," he says, he himself speaks. (M9-I).*

Another aspect pointed out by the mothers as an impediment to the consolidation of the post-separation co-parenting refers to the financial issue. Similar results were found in the study of Grzybowski and Wagner (2010), when

interviewing separated fathers and mothers, they highlighted that, in many cases, the pension food is the trigger of many conflicts between the former couple. This is because, the father who pays the pension often feels exploited, while the mother who receives feels undervalued.

*In his mind, the money that sometimes he pays, he thinks it is for me, he does not think that the child eats, I also have the expenses that is the flat, the light, everything, right? School transportation, clothing, equipment ... everything, the child spends a lot during the year (M8-I).*

*Daniel [former partner], sends money. "I want you to send money to your daughters, to help, then I am able to get closer to them and not work so hard and leave them alone," and then he said "No, I will send, I will send "," but the other time you promised and I waited and you did not send anything, "" no, but I'm going to send. " "All right then, from now on if the money will be not in my account, I'm going to court against your mother ... your mother will have to pay." If he does not pay, someone will pay (M9-I; observation: all names are fictitious).*

For the participants, there seems to be a men inherent difficulty to understand that the potential conflicts arising from the undone marital relationship should not influence the fatherhood exercise, as the following lines seem to register: "Even once somebody told me that the father only loves his son while he loves his mother, then he no longer loves." (M5-I).

*When I separated from my sons' father, he stayed far for long time, he didn't visit us, you know, it is as if he had been separated from me as well as from the children. They separate from the woman, but in fact 90% of men think they have to separate from their children, too, they have no more responsibility with the kids, you know? (M1-G).*

From the clippings presented, it seems to be clear that the father's distance after the end of the couple's relationship is considered, for many mothers, natural, since it would be proper for men to exempt of parental responsibility after the separation, although they had remained present during the couple's relationship. In fact, for a long time, the conjugal and parenthood concepts

were unified, predominating the understanding that "with the marital separation, the removal of one of the parents would be inevitable" (Brito, 2007, p. 44), and studies have indicated that this absence has been much more frequent by the father (Cunico & Arpini, 2013). In this opportunity, Padilla (2008) points out that there is a belief shared by the very family, by the child's mother and by the friends that consider nature a more distant behavior of the father after the dissolution of the loving relationship.

The report also identified difficulties regarding discrimination between the conjugality and parenthood dimensions by the own study participants. This question was evident at the time the mothers were asked about the fathers importance in the family environment, as a result this fact also appeared in several instances of the interviews and the focus groups. *"In the family environment I do not even know if he's that such importance [the father]. Because I'm alone for so long that I do not even think I miss him, you know?"* (M1-I).

It could be perceived from the previous report, that the answer given by the mother seemed to relate more to her not separate wish, than her perception related to the parenthood. This is evident when she states that the father *"I do not even think I miss him,"* as the fatherhood importance was directly related to her dissatisfaction forward to the loving relationships she had.

#### **"He already has another partner": the new father relationship.**

Based upon the men tend to remarry more quickly than women (Cano et al., 2009), it is understood that the establishment of a new family by the father and the likely children of this union may, in a sense, intensify the paternal distance from the first family / the previous family (Soares, 2008; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1998). This occurs mainly when there is difficulty of acceptance by the current partner (Cunico & Arpini, 2013). That approach was explained by some of the participants as follows.

*There are two possibilities: either he was a child also rejected by her father and he is until today and he does not know how to give love after coming out from the family life, or the woman he's living says no, that she does not accept ...either she or the children.* (M2-G).

*So that, as I talk to Camila, I say "Camila, your father for now is alone, when he find another person, it is difficult the other partner to reconcile another family that your father had, we'll have slowly to get used about this. The visit will decrease. Now he's all yours, but the moment that he has another partner in the middle ...". Of course they [the former's current women] do not accept. It is difficult because it is always a connection that will have a problem.* (M3-G).

On the other hand, some mothers mentioned that the father's remarriage brings them closer to the children, since the new partner played complementary roles in relation to theirs (Grzybowski & Wagner, 2010).

*Then he got another partner and he began to pay attention to his daughters, because his partner pays attention to her daughters, his partner has the same attention I have as a mother, they call her mother, the heart mother and the blood mother, then I think he learned from her, you know, to give attention to the two daughters.* (M10-I).

In this opportunity, the importance of understanding the role that the father current partner takes over the maintenance of the parental bond among the father and the sons of the former relationship is highlighted. That is, the paternal commitment seems to depend significantly on this new marriage relationship and on the new partner support or disapproval (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1998), a clear demonstration of the difficulties that some fathers have in separating what is proper to the conjugality and what is in terms of parenthood. In addition to these issues, we could notice that the presence of the father current partner may potentiate the possible existing conflicts between the child father and mother, as the following lines seem to register.

*I fought with his father, I fought until to stop on the floor, then his father [Ex-father-in-law] separated us. Then after this fight I took John from their living, from everybody, so I said, "no one will never see John again." It is because that day I met the other, you know? And I saw that he actually had this woman in his life, I met her, I saw that she was true, then I went insane.* (M4-I).

*Then he had a new relationship and that's when he started looking for his son ... when he found a person, he found someone to care, you know? A female person, in the case, so we had a very troubled relationship, you know? He was going to visit, then he took Pablo to his house, he was entitled to keep Pablo when he wanted to, but then I went to take him. (M1-G).*

It seems that the difficulty that some mothers have to accept the new union of the former partner is, in many cases, expressed in the way they seek to act as a significant barrier to the father's participation in the children lives (Dolto, 1989/2011, Padilha, 2008). This statement can be seen in the previous situations presented, in which, by jealousy of this new relationship, one mother took the child from living with his father's family and the other disqualified the father's presence, limiting his visit time.

Still, it is interesting to observe that this mother restriction, which is, in most cases, linked to the existence of a new partner in the former partner life, tends to decrease with greater acceptance of this new union from the mother and/or when she starts a new marriage relationship (Padilha, 2008; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1998). *"Before there was no dialogue, there was not. Now that it's over ... we talk, at least we try."* (M6-I).

*At first we spent our time only fighting, nor by phone we could talk. Nowadays is different, I do not know if it's because I'm more accepting his relationship with the other. Hence even we have not fought now ... I will not say he is not a good father just because he got another partner ... We cannot force anyone to stay with anyone. (M7-I).*

The way the parents will lead this situation on establishing a new union - in this father case - reverberates in greater or lesser acceptance of the children for the new family configuration (Smith, 2008). Parallel to this, it is understood that the father's attitude towards the children from the undone marital relationship may also exert influence to the conflicts minimization or maximization, resulting from this new relationship.

### Parental roles

This category encompassed the meanings given by the mothers to the differences in the

parental roles performance. It will be composed by the following subcategories: "Mother is already quite another connection" and "Man is quite unprepared to be a father".

#### "Mother is already quite another connection"

The positions assumed by the participants in this study elucidated the idea that the relationship between mother and child tends to be more intimate and stronger than the connection that the children will have with their father, reinforcing the idea that the mother is the most important in the offspring life (Pinto et al, 2011; Reis, 2010; Vieira & Souza, 2010). The following statements are illustrative in this regard. *"Being a mother is different from being a father, I think. Mother is already quite another connection, father to me is so ... because he will never have the same connection I have with them."* (M3-I). *"Either one has an importance and today ... from my side; I think the mother is far more important than the father in the child life."* (M5-I).

In order to assess the role played by them in their children lives, it was observed that the participants positively assessed their motherhood exercise, holding such an assessment in an altruistic and benevolent issue that would be inherent in women who exercise maternal functions (Grzybowski & Wagner, 2010). *"All I do is according to my son today, you know? I do not think anything for me, just for me"* (M5-I). *"It's because mother's heart is so..., I am so ... if I win something, a chocolate or anything that I get, I cannot eat, I have to take home to share."* (M1-G). *"There are fathers who are different. Rarity! But they are not like the mother, 'cause mother thinks with her heart, she does not think with her head."* (M10-G).

This trend observed with frequency in the women, valuing the motherhood in detriment of the fatherhood and it also appeared clearly at the time that mothers talked about the possibility of a father get the child custody, leaving to the mother the pension food (Reis, 2010).

*There was a time he [the former partner] got angry with me and he said he was going to take her from me. That's when I decided to go to court. I even told him "no, you want to do, you do, but her custody is mine from the time you left the house. Her custody is mine, for you take her from me you have to prove that I am wrong on something".* (M3-I).

*I have paid during four years [ the pension food for the child who lived with his father]. And we thought that it was a cowardice, you know? The fact that I have to pay pension to him, although it is in the law, especially I already had another child. (M4-I).*

From the clippings presented, it is possible to infer how much mothers seem to have a significant attachment to qualifying arrangements from what they understand as the maternal and paternal duties, having trouble in thinking on the father and mother places differently. Thus, it is strange the possibility of a father get the child custody without proving that the mother has no jurisdiction to exercise it (Padilha, 2008). In addition, the pension food paid by the mother is seen as a "cowardice", since historically, it was up to the man the function of providing materially his wife and his children (Freitas et al., 2009; Reis, 2010).

In fact, although significant changes are happening in the family setting, which are changing the family roles, it is displayed that these have not always been equally experienced in everyday context (Cunico & Arpini, 2013). Regarding the study participants, many have demonstrated extremely traditional views in respect to the roles both parents should play in the family and how the legislation should behave in this context:

*For indeed, the provider is the man of the house, not the woman. The woman is the man helper, she is always a helper. But actually, the provider is the man. He is who works and the woman is always the helper, she will always be behind, always helping, always helping. She will never be the head of the house because in fact the head is the man. (M1-G).*

*If the law protected the child maybe today I could not condemn it . So, "Mother, you have the obligation to stay at home with your son and you (to the father) will work, and give a pension to pay all the child needs." If you analyze, it would like me who grew up with a father who ordered everything at home, the father who had an obligation to support their children, to give the good and the best for his wife, for his children (M10-G).*

As seen, old conceptions and naturalized expectations about motherhood and the father

function are still present in the collective imagination of both men and women (Reis, 2010). In this sense, it seems to be evident how such conceptions end up making the woman attached to the family and to the roles that are expected from her (Carloto, 2005). The following speech points in that direction:

*In late 2006, at a hearing, I got tired you know, I got tired of it. It was torture for everyone. So I decided to give up the child custody, so that the father would take him, since it was so much what they [the father and the son] wanted and then I thought I'd better leave and stop it. Then I say: what kind of mother am I? I try my best, but I cannot be a mother to hold the children, you know? I know I give so all I can and what I cannot related to material, but my mother thinks I'm failing ... I'm failing in love, I think. (M4-I).*

As shown the cut, her son desire to live with his father after the separation of the couple seems to have been experienced by this mother as something that impacted her understanding of the role she played. This is because, she appears conceivable that the choice of his son live with his father is due almost exclusively to a fault while she is a mother. This situation leads to the difficulty that many women show in order to have to share this historic power exercise referred to maternity (Reis, 2010).

#### **"Man is quite unprepared to be a father"**

With regard to the care given to children, mothers asserted certain asymmetry with respect to the attention given by them and by the ex-partner, which was described as unable to put the children as a priority in their lives. Similar results were found in studies by Carloto (2005) and Turney (2011).

*He is a very selfish person, he only thinks in himself. If he has two sweets, he eats the two sweets and he does not think of giving one of them for you, you know? And I am already the contrary, I take from me everything to give my children. (M2-I).*

Depending on the results of other studies (Carloto, 2005), many mothers mentioned the dissatisfaction facing the parenthood performed by the post-separation ex-partner. According to them, the paternal concern in this context would



be guided solely in the payment of the pension food, not extending to the daily and emotional care of children. *"They think it's mother's responsibility. It remains to be all to the mother. I think so, they think the responsibility lies with the mother: 'I'm already giving the pension, then be on your own', you know?"* (M1-G).

*I think they think so because it because as the child was born from us, we have to be on our own, you know? To tell you the truth, it is the selfishness and the materialism side that they think as they are giving two hundred as a pension "ah, you can buy the monthly milk, be on your own". As if the money was a feeling, you know? Something like that, ah money for their children, they do not understand that for the child it is important the care, the love, they think money is everything* (M10-G).

Based on the analysis of the cuttings presented, two questions are important to be highlighted. One of them refers to the idea shared by many men that mother's role is to present themselves as caring for the offspring. In this context, it is understood that the spread of such an idea has the potential to contribute, to some extent, with the paternal disclaimer before the care and the involvement with the children (Padilha, 2008).

The other question concerns the view of the mothers that men link the paternity essentially with the question of being a provider. Thus, according to them, the fathers who comply with the payment of the pension food feel released from the emotional relationship with the children, because, for them, their father function is supposedly being fulfilled (Freitas et al., 2009). The reports of the participants in this study appeared to refer to a paternity vision rooted in the men's lack of preparation for the role, being considered rare those parents who truly are linked with the offspring.

*They already have a lack of preparation, even if he says so "oh, I really want to have a child", when a woman becomes pregnant is a shock to them because it will completely change not only their lives, but the life of the woman who is with them ... if he had a game, the game will continue there and he will be able to go. She cannot longer or because the child's with colic, or because it's too cold or I do not know what else.* (M3-G).

*Not everyone wants to have this eternal bond thus there are many who don't ... "let's leave the time goes then when they grew up they forget me." They are not prepared, I think so, man is quite unprepared to be a father, there is a minority that clings to his children so.* (M3-G).

This scenario also stressed at the time of the focus group in which the mothers were invited to discuss the presented problem situations. One of the situations reported the fictitious case of the couple Bruno and Luiza that were dating for two months when she decided it was time to them have a child. Shortly after, the relationship ended and Bruno distanced himself completely from Luiza that was already pregnant, and Bruno has not been following the pregnancy or his daughter birth. To be inquired of the reasons why Bruno walked away, the mothers asserted:

*He was not worried, he did not want to have a child, he did not want to be hold, he wants freedom. It was not him that was pregnant, it was not his belly that would grow, he wanted to continue with his normal life. As mine who continued with his normal life ... selfishness ... I do not know. More is in the soap-opera, where everything about this is a wonderful thing [men become happy with the paternity], in real life it does not happen.* (M4-G).

*They do not think "oh, I'll be a father, oh thanks God." In real life they have to pay the pension food or to give food to another ... The mother may say to a child like "you're mine, I made you, that is me who delivered you, you're mine, period!," the father only shared.* (M2-G).

As seen, the participants demonstrated to consider the men, generally, unprepared and unconcerned with the exercise of the parental functions, in addition the care, the caring and love as feminine adjectives. For mothers, the fatherly love and the will to be a father are not inherent in the man, and those who actually experience the father role are considered as exceptions.

However, it interests to highlight that such reflections did not follow the participants reports regarding maternity, which was described as something inherent to the female. In this sense, one might think the own mothers end up

reinforcing and perpetuating the idea of maternal instinct, contributing to the view that the paternity has a peripheral place within the family (Padilha, 2008).

### FINAL THOUGHTS

In the light of these discussions, there seems to be a number of crossings that permeate the coparental relationship after divorce. One of the main difficulties in establishing a healthy relationship coparental seems to be no distinction of what is proper to the conjugality and what is inherent to the parenthood. Therefore, it is not unusual to understand how much the relationship established between the former couple interferes in the way they will relate to the children, who are fruit of this union. Thus, a conflicted relationship and/or with feelings vestige, which were nourished for each other, can increase the distance of that parent who does not have the child custody, in most cases, the father.

In addition, it was found that the father's remarriage also has the potential to distance him or bring him even more from the past relationship children. For this reason, it was noticed that to the new partner is given a prominent role in this new family configuration. This happens because the maintenance of the paternal relationship with the children of other relationships seems to be permeated by the current partner support or disapproval, indicating once again, how the dimensions of conjugality and parenthood can be integrated, even after the dissolution of the bond love between the former spouses.

Along with these issues, the study pointed to the importance of addressing some paradigms related to motherhood and fatherhood, dissolving, in particular, the naturalized perspectives on mother always be the best caregiver, and the father be the secondary in relation to the children. It is understood that before the father can experience a more involved way of parenting it is necessary that the mother also gives space, so that the bond between parent and child can be strengthened. In other words, there is no way to establish changes in the parenthood exercise without such changes are accompanied by a new way of experiencing the mother role.

Given this context, we emphasize the importance of performing actions that seek to

monitor the parents related to the parenthood conjugal post-dissolution exercise. In addition, it is evidenced the need of having listening spaces for couples in a separation process, which will help them to reflect on the consequences that come with the end of the couple's relationship, so that potential conflicts will not adversely affect the contact among parents and children.

Finally, we point out the importance of studies that reflect on families of different contours and the relationships that are established in them, in particular, those pertaining to the families that are women householders. Understanding how children deal with the family transformations and how they feel the impact of the end of the conjugality has in the parental relationship becomes relevant in a context in which the marital relations seem to have instability and transience.

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Received: June 17, 2014

Approved: Nov. 24, 2014

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