



Parental leave and work adaptation at the transition to parenthood: Individual, marital, and social correlates

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Abstract

This study examined individual, marital, and social–contextual factors associated with the length of maternity and paternity leave and the parents’ work adaptation at the transition to parenthood. Ninety-eight dual-earner parents of 3- to 5-month-old infants were surveyed following the mother’s return to work. A shorter maternity leave (< 12 weeks) was associated with higher maternal depression, lower parental preoccupation with the infant, less knowledge of infant development, more negative impact of birth on self-esteem and marriage, and higher career centrality. Fathers took an average of 6.5 days as paternity leave and longer leaves were related to positive employer reaction, higher paternal preoccupation with infant, more marital support, and higher family salience. Mothers’ work adaptation was related to shorter work hours, higher marital support, lower depression, and career centrality, whereas marital support and career centrality predicted fathers’ work adaptation. Shorter parental leave combined with perceived low-quality childcare predicted lower parental adjustment to the work role. Risk indicators at the transition to dual-earner parenthood and implications for social policy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The transition to parenthood marks a period of reorganization in the life cycle of families, associated with significant changes in the couple’s relationship, responsibilities, and preoccupations

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(Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Feldman, 2000; Heinicke, 1984; Levy-Shiff, 1994). With the numbers of employed mothers continuously on the rise, the transition to parenthood is also the time when many couples enter the role of dual-earner parents and must learn to balance work and family (Feldman, Masalha, & Nadam, 2001). In the United States, for example, 59% of mothers with infants under the age of 1 year were employed in 1996, compared to 31% in 1975 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997). Because mothers are still the primary caregivers in most households and take longer leaves than their husbands (Han & Waldfogel, 2003), the mother's return to work following the first childbirth starts the couple's life as a dual-earner family. The parents' adaptation to reemployment draws upon a range of risk and protective factors: parental well-being, marital relationship, subjective appraisal of the childbirth, attitudes toward work and family, investment in parenting, and the infant's dispositions and temperament. In addition to these intrafamily factors, positive adaptation to dual-employment depends on societal provisions to new parents, in terms of adequate and affordable childcare, support in the work place, and state and federal parental leave laws (Zigler, Frank, & Emmel, 1988). The goal of the present study was to examine the individual, marital, and social-contextual correlates of the length of maternity and paternity leave and assess factors that may be related to a more successful adaptation to reemployment among dual-earner couples at the transition to parenthood.

Theoretical and empirical accounts on the transition to parenthood (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 1992) and the dual-earner family (e.g., Gottfried & Gottfried, 1994) underscore the need to evaluate adaptation at this stage from a multifactor, ecological, and systemic perspective. According to such perspectives, proximal and distal risk and protective factors interact in shaping parental adjustment and the family atmosphere (Belsky, 1984; Sameroff, 1993). During the transition to dual-earner parenthood, stress is especially high. Results of a nationally representative study of 2958 employed men and women indicated that parents suffer more job stress than nonparents, stress is primarily related to the work-family balance, and the coping strategies of parents are less adaptive (Galinsky, Bond, & Friedman, 1996). Of the parents group, parents in dual-earner families experience more stress compared to single-earner families (Harwood, 1988), stress increases at the transition to parenthood (Owen & Cox, 1988), and women in dual-earner families are more stress-prone than their husbands during the transition (Lewis & Cooper, 1988).

Maternal stress following the first childbirth has been associated with changes in the marital relationship, in particular the decline in marital satisfaction experienced by some couples (Belsky & Pensky, 1988), the shift toward traditional role division, the husband's reduced participation in household chores (Ruble, Hackel, Fleming, & Stangor, 1988), and the low involvement of dual-earner fathers in childcare responsibilities (Grych & Clark, 1999; Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987). Marital support, on the other hand, is among the central predictors of family adaptation at the transition to parenthood (Parke & Beitel, 1988), and higher marital support has been associated with lower work-family interference (Hughes, Galinsky, & Morris, 1992). Maternal depression is another well-known risk condition following childbirth, affecting 8–10% of postpartum mothers (Burt & Stein, 2002). The father's physical and emotional support is among the central protective factors against maternal depression (Cutrona & Troutman, 1986), and increased father involvement reduces marital stress and facilitates the infant's social development at the transition to parenthood (Feldman, 2000). In addition, a difficult infant temperament exacerbates maternal stress and depression, interferes with maternal adaptation to reemployment, contributes to marital distress, and disrupts the formation of an optimal parent-infant relationship (Feldman, 2003; Feldman et al., 2001; Levy-

Shiff, 1994). Finally, risk and resiliency factors tend to be interrelated, exert both cumulative and interactive effects on parental adaptation, and have a stronger impact during periods of transition or reorganization (Belsky, 1997; Rutter, 1987). Thus, it is likely that parental adaptation to reemployment following the first birth would be related to parent, child, and marital factors—the determinants of parenting (Belsky, 1984)—including parental depression, difficult infant temperament, and the level of marital support.

Apart from the family microsystem, the support provided by the social macrosystem to new parents is an important contributor to family adaptation. Three factors related to societal provision to parents have been found to increase parental functioning in the work role: work hours, childcare quality, and the length of parental leave. Flexible hours, greater autonomy, and more accepting employers' attitudes have been associated with lower work stress and better job functioning, emphasizing the importance of a supportive workplace culture and flexible work conditions to parental work adaptation (Galinsky et al., 1996). Feldman et al. (2001) found that shorter work hours and higher childcare quality predicted better work adaptation among women returning from maternity leave after the birth of their first child, but these factors had no effect on the father's work functioning.

With regards to the length of parental leave, until recently, the United States was the only industrial nation with no standard parental leave policy (Frank & Lipner, 1988). The *Family and Medical Leave Act* (1993), approved by President Clinton in 1993, granted unpaid leave of up to 12 weeks within the first year of childbirth to employees covered by the legislation, that is, those holding a full-time position in a workplace employing 50 persons or more. These minimal benefits stand in sharp contrast to parental leave policies in European countries, which offer a paid parental leave for the first few weeks after childbirth and up to 18 months of fully job-protected unpaid leave (Kamerman, 1988; Ondrich, Spiess, & Yang, 1996; Wood, 2002). Research in European countries has pointed to the beneficial impact of a paid federal leave on family adaptation. A study of 17 industrial countries found that the provision of a paid maternity leave was associated with a decrease in infant mortality, an increase in women's participation in the work force during the childbearing years, and an increase in birth rates (Winegarden & Bracy, 1995). The introduction of a paid paternity leave in Scandinavian countries has been instrumental in changing employers' views on fathering, creating an accepting corporate atmosphere toward parenting, and increasing fathers' participation in childcare and family life (Brandth & Kvande, 2002; Haas, 1992). On the other hand, the unpaid parental leave provided under the FMLA appears to have little effect on parents' leave-taking behavior. A recent survey of 8377 mothers and fathers from 1996 to 1999 showed that the FMLA had no effect on men's leave usage and had some, but not substantial impact on the length of maternity leave (Han & Waldfogel, 2003). Other reports confirm the limited effect of the FMLA, although more mothers have been reported to take leaves after the approval of the FMLA (Klerman & Leibowitz, 1994; Waldfogel, 1999).

The length of maternity leave has been associated with various individual and contextual factors. It had been argued that to raise well-adapted children and a healthy society, parents must be provided an initial period of adjustment after childbirth (Bronfenbrenner, 1988; Zigler et al., 1988). Following birth, parents require a period of total involvement with the infant, attentiveness to his or her communicative signals, and preoccupation with becoming a parent (Brazelton, 1986). This heightened involvement in the infant's well-being and growth—termed *primary maternal preoccupation* (Winnicott, 1956)—peaks during the first weeks of life (Leckman et al., 1999) and can be disrupted by the parent's early return to work. Diminished parental preoccupation is considered a risk signal that is associated with depression,

anxiety, and reduced interest in the child (Feldman, Weller, Leckman, Kvint, & Eidelman, 1999). A short maternity leave has been associated with risk factors, including negative maternal affect and reduced sensitivity (Clark, Hyde, Essex, & Klein, 1997), work stress and overload, marital dissatisfaction (Hyde, Essex, Clark, & Klein, 2001), and increased depression and anxiety (Gjerdingen & Chaloner, 1994; Hyde, Klein, Essex, & Clark, 1995). Furthermore, it has been noted that the length of leave often interacts with other risk conditions, such as long working hours or low childcare quality, rather than exerting a direct impact on maternal adjustment. This implies that within a multirisk context, a short leave may exacerbate an already precarious maternal adaptation during a period of heightened stress. Finally, in contrast to research on maternity leave, nearly no information is available on fathers' leave usage or on the personal and contextual factors that are associated with fathers' leave-taking behavior (Han & Waldfogel, 2003).

Parental adaptation to reemployment depends not only on the parent's well-being and marital support or on the length of leave and employment conditions, but also on the centrality of the career and family aspects in the parent's life. Pleck's (1985) model on the "work–family role system" points to the close links between the individual's attitudes toward a role and functioning in that role. During periods of reevaluation of the work and family roles, such as the transition to parenthood, the centrality attributed to each role is especially meaningful to role adaptation (Voydanoff, 1989). For instance, maternal ambivalence toward the work role was found to predict lower functioning, higher depression, and increased maternal stress (Schwartzberg & Dytell, 1996). Thus, mothers who report higher career centrality may be inclined to take shorter leaves or to experience better adaptation to the work role. On the other hand, fathers who consider the family as a more salient aspect of their self-concept may tend to take longer leaves after the birth of their first child.

In sum, the present study examined factors that may be associated with the length of maternity and paternity leave and with the mother's and father's work adaptation following the first childbirth. Although the study is correlational and cannot point to causal factors, it is among the first attempts to examine a range of personal and contextual factors in relation to both maternity and paternity leaves and the parents' subsequent adjustment to reemployment. Guided by a systemic approach (Belsky, 1984; Gottfried & Gottfried, 1994), the parent's well-being, attitudes toward work and family, infant temperament, marital support, employer's attitudes toward parenting, and employment conditions were examined as potential correlates of the length of parental leave and work adaptation.

With regards to the length of parental leave, lower parent depression, higher marital support, perception of the infant as less difficult, and positive employer's reaction to childbirth were expected to be associated with longer parental leaves. A longer parental leave was also expected to afford parents a better opportunity for the initial mental involvement and to correlate with higher preoccupation with the child. Whether the pregnancy was planned or not was examined as a predictor of the parental leave. Adapting a life-cycle perspective on the work–family issue (Friedman & Galinsky, 1992), it was hypothesized that a timely, planned birth that coincides with the parent's life goals would be associated with longer leaves. Finally, the parent's attitudes toward the work and family roles were examined in relation to the length of leave. In light of research on work and family salience in women and men (Barnett & Baruch, 1987; Voydanoff, 1989), mothers with higher career centrality were expected to take shorter leaves, while fathers reporting higher family salience were expected to take longer leaves after the birth of their first child.

Mothers' and fathers' work adaptation were examined in relation to employment conditions: work hours, childcare quality, and the length of parental leave. In light of research on the contribution of these factors to maternal job performance (Feldman et al., 2001), we expected better work adaptation among women working shorter hours and those who perceived the quality of childcare as more optimal. In addition, marital support and parental depression were examined as the personal and contextual correlates of work adaptation. It was expected that parents experiencing lower depression and higher marital support would report better adaptation to reemployment. Consistent with the "work–family role system" model (Pleck, 1985), career centrality was expected to predict better work adaptation in women and men. Finally, according to the work of Hyde et al. (2001), the length of leave was examined in interaction with other risk factors in predicting parental adaptation to dual employment at the transition to parenthood.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Ninety-eight dual-earner mothers and fathers whose firstborn child was between 3 and 5 months old participated in the study. All participants were married and the participation of both partners was a prerequisite for inclusion in the study. All children were first-born, born at term age in a singleton birth, and were in good health since birth. To participate, the mother had to be employed prior to childbirth, take a period of maternity leave, and resume employment by the time of the survey. Families in which mothers could not take a leave or did not return to work (e.g., by choice, lost their job, or took longer leaves) were not included in the study.

Most participants (99%) were Caucasian and all had completed at least high school education, with 68% holding a college degree. The median occupational level based on Hollingshead's (1975) criteria was 7, implying an upper-middle class sample, and the mean of the overall Hollingshead socioeconomic (SES) score (based on education and income) was 53.46 ($SD = 10.48$, range = 25.0–69.0). Most of the participants (92%) had family incomes of \$50,000 or more. Mothers' age averaged 31.7 years ($SD = 3.33$, range = 24.8–41.8) and fathers' age averaged 33.4 ($SD = 3.97$, range = 25.7–41.8). Infants' age at the survey averaged 4 months, 4 days (range = 11.6 weeks to 22.5 weeks). Infant gender distribution was 56% male and 44% female.

Most of the participants (87%) worked as employees and the rest were self-employed. Most of the participants (84%) worked in the private sector and nearly all (96%) worked full-time before the birth of their child. Although more fathers (100%) than mothers (92%) worked full-time, this difference was not significant. After childbirth, 24% of the women who had worked full-time prior to childbirth returned to part-time employment. At the time of the survey, 100% of the fathers worked full-time as opposed to 69% of the mothers, $\chi^2(1, N = 98) = 17.05, p < .001$. After childbirth 7% of the parents changed employers, 10% changed positions, and almost 20% experienced a change in salary (12% increase and 7% decrease), with no gender differences in these changes.

Of those participants who were considered employees, 70% held jobs with characteristics equivalent to the requirements of the Family and Medical Leave Act (1993) (i.e., full-time position at a workplace with over 50 employees). However, women were significantly less likely to be eligible for a leave according to the FMLA, as 60% of the women qualified for the FMLA compared to 82%

of the men, $\chi^2(1, N = 98) = 4.86, p < .05$. Mothers took an average of 11.6 ($SD = 3.21$) weeks of maternity leave, with a range of 4–18 weeks and a median of 12 weeks. Fathers took an average of 6.5 days after the birth of their first child as parental leaves ($SD = 4.49$, range = 0–14 days, median = 6.5 days).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Demographic and background information

A cover sheet was used to obtain information about the child's date of birth and gender, the parent's date of birth, marital status, education level and occupation, the family's income level, and the division of household chores and childcare responsibilities between husband and wife.

2.2.2. Parent Leave Inventory

A modified version of the Parental Leave Inventory (PLI; Feldman & Zigler, 1994) was used as the main instrument of the study. The PLI includes 108 questions organized in five sections that address the parent's experiences, attitudes, and leave-taking behavior from a systemic perspective. Questions examined the pregnancy and childbirth experience, the level of spousal support, attitudes toward work and family, effects of childbirth on marriage and self-esteem, issues of employment and reemployment following childbirth, actual and preferred length of paid and unpaid leave, experiences as parents, childcare arrangements, knowledge of infant development and prior experience in infant care, and familiarity with, attitudes toward, and satisfaction with current federal and state parental leave policies. Most PLI items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (e.g., How would you rate the quality of infant care that you use?), some are phrased as yes/no questions (e.g., Did you find yourself forced to go back to work before you were ready?), and some are open-ended questions that were then subjected to content analysis.

In a previous study using the PLI (Feldman et al., 2001), 37 PLI items were subjected to factor analysis and three factors were identified (career centrality, family salience, and traditional sex-role attitudes). Similar factors were used in the present study and internal consistency for the present sample was adequate.

Career centrality: The average of seven items assessing the parent's attitudes and functioning in the work role, such as career as a central aspects of one's life, satisfaction with career progress, life feels incomplete without work, strive for excellence at work, competitiveness at work, and satisfaction with career progress ($\alpha = .76$).

Family salience: The average of six items regarding the parent's focus on the family role, such as life feels incomplete without family, family as the parent's main source of security, or family as the most important aspect of one's life ($\alpha = .75$).

Traditional sex-role attitudes: The average of the parent's endorsement of the following three statements: raising children is the most important and fulfilling aspect of a woman's life; mothers should stay home when children are young; and mothers' early return to work may have a permanent impact on the child. Scores for the composite of the three responses ranged from 1 (*low*) to 5 (*high*) and Cronbach's α was .71.

The following 11 additional variables also were derived from responses to PLI items:

Work adaptation: The average of six questions regarding the parent's functioning in the work role following childbirth, such as how well the parent is performing at work, how postbirth job performance compares with prebirth performance, and the degree to which thoughts or worries about the infant

interfere with job performance ($\alpha = .74$). Scores ranged from 1 (*low*) to 5 (*high*) and this factor was used as a criterion variable.

Planned pregnancy: Parents rated yes/no regarding whether the pregnancy was planned.

Reaction to pregnancy: Parents rated their reaction to the pregnancy and their spouse's reaction to the pregnancy each on a scale from 1 (*negative*) to 5 (*positive*). The two scores were averaged into a single composite ($\alpha = .82$).

Impact of childbirth: The average of two items rated from 1 (*negative*) to 5 (*positive*) that examined the impact of childbirth on the parent's self-esteem and on the marital relationship ($\alpha = .83$).

Marital support: The average of two items (rated from 1 to 5) that addressed the father's physical support and the father's emotional support to the mother ($\alpha = .71$). Fathers rated the help they provided to their wives; mothers rated the help received from their husbands.

Experience and knowledge: Four questions addressed the parent's previous experience and knowledge of infant development (rated from 1 to 5), including the parent's prior experience in caring for infant siblings, general experience with infants, knowledge of infant development, and active seeking of information about infant development through the media, books, or parenting classes. These items were not highly correlated and were not averaged into a single score.

Preoccupation with infant: The average of three items addressing the parents' preoccupation with the infant (rated from 1 to 5): degree of thinking about the infant; worries about the infant's well-being and development; and worries about not being a good parent to the infant ($\alpha = .69$).

Infant difficult temperament: The average of two items ($\alpha = .80$); how would you describe your infant's temperament (from 1 = *very easy* to 5 = *very difficult*) and how predictable is your infant's schedule (from 1 = *not predictable* to 5 = *very predictable*).

Length of leave: A score representing the time (in days) between the date of birth and the time the parent returned to full- or part-time employment.

Quality of childcare: Parents rated the level of childcare they use on a range from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*).

Employer's reaction: Parents rated their employer's reaction to the childbirth from 1 (*negative*), through 3 (*indifferent*), to 5 (*positive and supportive*).

2.2.3. State–Trait Anxiety Inventory

This well-validated 40-item measure uses separate scales (20 items each) to assess stable individual differences in anxiety proneness (trait) and current states of anxiety. Responders rate the degree to which each statement (e.g., "I worry too much over something that really does not matter") corresponds to their emotional state or personality trait on a range from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very much*). Scores range from 20 to 80 and a score above 48 is considered a risk signal for heightened anxiety. Cronbach's α coefficients ranging from .83 to .92 for state anxiety and from .86 to .92 for trait anxiety have been reported for the State–Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI; [Spielberger, Gorsuch, & Lushene, 1970](#)). The Cronbach's α for the current sample was .84 for state anxiety and .87 for trait anxiety.

2.2.4. Beck Depression Inventory

The Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; [Beck & Steer, 1987](#)) was used to measure the parent's depressive symptoms. Each item consists of four possible statements (i.e., I do not feel sad; I do feel sad; I feel sad all the time and I cannot snap out of it; I am so sad or unhappy that I cannot stand it) that

receive a score from 0 to 3. The responder marks the statement that matches his/her current feelings and the final score is the sum of the individual's response on all 21 items. Scores range from 0 to 63 and a score of above 15 signals a risk for depression. This 21-item instrument demonstrates good reliability, with a mean Cronbach's α coefficient of .81 for nonpsychiatric samples (Beck, Steer, & Garbin, 1988). Cronbach's α for the current sample was .83.

2.3. Procedures

The participant pool was derived from a birth record database containing the names of families with children born in the New Haven area between April 1996 and February 1998. A letter explaining the study was sent to 1260 families of infants whose names appeared in the database. Because the database did not contain demographic information, letters were sent to all families with infants born within this period, including single and married parents, employed and nonemployed parents, and parents of firstborn and later-born, term and preterm infants, with the assumption that the vast majority of parents would not be eligible for the study. Letters informed parents of the study goals and the eligibility requirements for participation (first child to both parents, mother returned to work after a leave, no child disability or illness, both partners are currently employed and agree to participate). Parents who were eligible and interested in participating returned a postcard indicating their child's birthdate and each parent's occupation and education level. Of those parents receiving the initial contact letter, 126 families (10%) returned the postcard. Twenty-six of these families (21%) were not eligible, primarily because the child was not their first one. A random sample of 200 nonresponders was contacted again for a brief, one-page follow-up survey asking them to indicate the reason for not responding. Of the 82 (41%) initial nonresponders whom we contacted and responded to this survey, 72 (88%) indicated that they were not eligible for participation. The education level and occupations of those nonresponders were comparable to those of the participating parents.

Eligible parents who returned the postcard (100 families) received two packets of surveys in the mail, one for the mother and one for the father. Each packet contained a cover sheet requesting background information, the PLI, the STAI, and the BDI. Of those receiving the surveys, 49 families (49%) completed and returned the forms. A random sample of 50% of the parents who did not return the completed surveys was contacted. Fifty percent of them returned the follow-up surveys, and these parents indicated either busy schedules (68%) or a realization that they were not in fact eligible for participation (32%). Parents who returned the full surveys received a modest amount of monetary compensation for their participation.

3. Results

Results are reported in three sections. In the first section, experiences and attitudes of first-time dual-earner parents are reported. The second section explores differences in individual, marital, and contextual factors between mothers who took shorter (<12 weeks) and longer maternity leaves. The final section presents four hierarchical regressions predicting the length of maternity and paternity leave and the mother's and father's work adaptation following the first childbirth. Power calculations indicate that the sample was large enough to provide power for a medium effects size ($\alpha = .05$) on all eight statistical tests (Cohen, 1992).

3.1. Experiences and attitudes of first-time parents

3.1.1. Impact of pregnancy and childbirth

Parents generally felt positive about the pregnancy and childbirth. Eighty-seven percent of the parents indicated that the pregnancy was planned. Parents rated their reaction to the pregnancy ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.88$) and the impact of childbirth on their self-esteem and marriage ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.91$) as positive, with no differences between mothers and fathers. Interestingly, fathers rated the level of marital support they provided to their wives during pregnancy and since childbirth as significantly higher ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.76$) than the wives' perception of the support they received from their husbands ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.09$), $F(1, 97) = 8.93$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.085$. Positive impact of childbirth was associated with longer maternity leaves ($r = .30$, $p < .05$) but was unrelated to paternity leave or work adaptation.

3.1.2. Preoccupation with infant

Parents reported an average to high level of preoccupation with the infant's well-being and the parenting process ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.87$), with no differences between mothers and fathers.

3.1.3. Experience and knowledge of infant development

Mothers scored significantly higher than fathers on the four questions relating to experience and knowledge, including prior experience in caring for infant siblings, $F(1, 97) = 9.97$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.172$, general experience with infants, $F(1, 97) = 3.94$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.072$, knowledge of infant development, $F(1, 97) = 8.93$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.163$, and active seeking of information about infant development through the media, books, or parenting classes, $F(1, 97) = 18.71$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.291$. Knowledge of infant development correlated with longer maternity and paternity leaves (mothers, $r = .36$, $p < .05$; fathers; $r = .29$, $p < .05$) but not with work adaptation.

3.1.4. Career centrality, family salience, and sex-role attitudes

No differences between mothers and fathers were found for the level of family salience and the endorsement of traditional sex-role attitudes. Fathers reported higher career centrality ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.57$) than mothers ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.82$), $F(1, 97) = 3.41$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.048$. Parents reported placing higher centrality on the family ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.48$) than on the career aspect of their lives at the transition to parenthood ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.72$), $t(97) = 7.23$, $p < .01$.

Mothers' career centrality was associated with shorter maternity leaves ($r = -.35$, $p < .05$) and higher work adaptation ($r = .46$, $p < .001$). Mothers' traditional sex-role attitudes were unrelated to the length of leave but correlated with lower work adaptation ($r = -.29$, $p < .05$). Mothers' family salience was unrelated to the length of leave or work adaptation. Fathers' career centrality was unrelated to the length of paternity leave or father work adaptation. Fathers' traditional sex-role attitudes were unrelated to leave or work adaptation. Fathers' family salience was related to longer paternity leaves ($r = .29$, $p < .05$) but not to work adaptation. No infant gender effects were found for any of the study variables.

3.2. Length of maternity leave and individual, marital, and contextual factors

The median length of maternity leave was 12 weeks, which also represents the length of paid leave in many industrial countries and the leave provided by [Family and Medical Leave Act \(1993\)](#). We thus

divided mothers into groups of those who took short (<12 weeks) and long (12 weeks or more) leaves to examine the differences between these two groups in experiences and attitudes of first-time parents, in addition to using the length of leave as a continuous variable in the following analyses.

Mothers who took longer leaves reported higher family salience ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 0.25$) than those who took shorter leaves ($M = 4.68$, $SD = 0.58$), $F(1, 48) = 4.25$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.081$. Mothers who returned to work before 12 weeks reported higher career centrality ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.77$) than mothers who returned to work after 12 weeks ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.83$), $F(1, 48) = 4.12$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.080$. No differences between the long and short maternity leave groups were observed for traditional sex-role attitudes. Mothers in the long-leave group had more knowledge of infant development ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.72$) than mothers in the short-leave group ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.78$), $F(1, 48) = 4.08$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.078$. Mothers who had longer leaves were more preoccupied with the infant ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.88$) than mothers who had shorter leaves ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.83$), $F(1, 48) = 3.97$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.077$. Finally, mothers who took longer leaves described a better impact of childbirth on their self-esteem and marriage ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 0.68$) than those who took shorter leaves ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.99$), $F(1, 48) = 4.06$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.079$.

3.3. Predicting maternity leave, paternity leave, and work adaptation

3.3.1. Maternity leave

Bivariate correlations among the variables are presented in Table 1. As seen in Table 1, longer maternity leaves were related to higher preoccupation with the infant and lower career centrality. Marital support was related to perception of the infant as less difficult and to lower maternal depression. Maternal depression was negatively related to preoccupation with the infant.

Table 2 presents a hierarchical regression predicting the length of maternity leave from individual, marital, and social-contextual factors. Variables were entered in a theoretically determined order. In the first block, planned pregnancy was entered as a measure of the parent's preparedness to parenthood and the suitability of its timing to the parent's life goals. Following this step, the employer's accepting reaction to childbirth was entered in light of research showing that attitudes in the workplace are central to the parent's work functioning (Galinsky et al., 1996) and may thus be related to parental leave-taking. On the next step, infant temperament, parenting preoccupation, marital support, and personality depression factors were entered in line with Belsky's (1984) "determinants of parenting" model that

Table 1
Bivariate correlations among mothers' self-report scores ($n = 49$)

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Length of maternity leave	.06	.15	-.19	.28*	.25 [†]	-.24 [†]	-.35*
2. Planned pregnancy		.03	-.24 [†]	.13	.21	-.04	-.11
3. Employer's reaction to childbirth			-.30*	-.11	.17	-.10	.22
4. Infant difficult temperament				-.23	-.30*	.18	-.11
5. Preoccupation with infant					.22	-.30*	-.16
6. Marital support						-.36*	.07
7. Parent depression							-.06
8. Career centrality							

* $p < .05$. [†] $p < .10$.

Table 2
Summary of hierarchical regression analysis predicting the length of maternity leave

Predictors	Beta	R	ΔR^2	ΔF
Planned pregnancy	.15	.14	.02	1.46
Employer's reaction	.03	.17	.00	0.12
Infant difficult temperament	–.19	.27	.05	2.85 [†]
Preoccupation with infant	.24*	.40	.09	4.62*
Marital support	.23*	.46	.06	3.95*
Parent depression	–.28*	.53	.05	3.98*
Career centrality	–.27*	.60	.09	5.62*
R^2 total = .36, $F(7, 40) = 3.62$, $p < .01$				

* $p < .05$. [†] $p < .10$.

underscores the contributions of parent, child, and marital factors to parental adaptation. Finally, the mother's career centrality was entered. According to Pleck's (1985) "work–family role system" model, attitudes toward a role are closely linked to functioning in that role and thus, the contribution of career centrality was examined above and beyond all other factors in the model.

As seen in Table 2, higher maternal preoccupation, $F(4, 43) = 4.62$, $p < .05$, higher marital support, $F(5, 42) = 3.95$, $p < .05$, lower maternal depression, $F(6, 41) = 3.98$, $p < .05$, and lower career centrality, $F(4, 43) = 5.62$, $p < .05$, each had a unique contribution to the prediction of the length of maternity leave. The effect for infant difficult temperament approached significance, $F(3, 44) = 2.85$, $p = .08$.

3.3.2. Paternity leave

Bivariate correlations between the variables predicting the length of paternity leave are presented in Table 3. Results presented in Table 3 indicate that longer paternity leaves were related to a planned pregnancy, better employer's reaction to childbirth, more preoccupation with the infant, and higher family salience. Family salience was associated with fathers' marital support and with higher preoccupation with the infant. Positive employer reaction to childbirth was related to higher marital support. Family salience was related to more paternal preoccupation with the infant, to higher marital support, and to lower father depression. The father's state anxiety was related to more negative

Table 3
Bivariate correlations among fathers' self-report scores ($n = 49$)

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Length of paternity leave	.29*	–.30*	–.06	.30*	.24 [†]	.06	.27*
2. Planned pregnancy		–.10	–.14	.08	.22 [†]	.05	–.07
3. Employer's reactions to childbirth			–.10	.13	.28*	–.09	.05
4. Infant difficult temperament				.07	–.16	.07	.05
5. Preoccupation with infant					.27*	.22	.29*
6. Marital support						–.12	.46**
7. Parent depression							–.30*
8. Family salience							

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. [†] $p < .10$.

employer's reaction to childbirth ($r = -.30, p < .05$) and the relationship between father's state anxiety and shorter paternity leaves approached the level of significance ($r = -.27, p = .057$).

A regression model predicting the length of paternity leave is reported in Table 4. Similar variables to those predicting the length of maternity leave were entered in the same order. The father's family salience in the last block replaced the career centrality entered for mothers. Since women tend to take longer leaves than their husbands and paternity leave is not yet prevalent in the United States (Han & Waldfogel, 2003), it was hypothesized that fathers must have a high investment in the family to take longer leaves, whereas mothers may need to be focused on their career to return early to work.

Results presented in Table 4 indicate that a planned pregnancy, $F(1, 46) = 3.87, p < .05$, better employer's reaction to childbirth, $F(2, 45) = 3.75, p < .05$, higher marital support, $F(5, 42) = 3.81, p < .05$, and higher family salience, $F(7, 40) = 4.03, p < .05$ were each uniquely predictive of the length of paternity leave.

3.3.3. Work adaptation

No difference was found between maternal and paternal work adaptation following childbirth. Both women ($M = 3.29, SD = 0.78$) and men ($M = 3.56, SD = 0.55$) reported midlevel adjustment to reemployment following the birth of their first child. Still, different factors may be associated with adaptation in women and men and the next two regression analyses examined predictors of work adaptation for mothers and fathers separately. Predictors were entered in eight blocks in the following order. In the first two blocks, covariates that may impact on work adaptation were entered to control for their potential effects: child age and SES. The next three blocks examined work-related conditions that have been associated with job functioning: length of leave, work hours, and childcare quality. The next two blocks examined marital (marital support) and individual (parent depression) determinants of parental adaptation (Belsky, 1984). The final block examined the parent's career centrality, in light of Pleck's (1985) model on the links between role attitudes and role functioning. Results of the model predicting maternal work adaptation appear in Table 5.

As seen in Table 5, shorter work hours, $F(4, 38) = 3.72, p < .05$, marital support, $F(6, 38) = 3.92, p < .05$, parent depression, $F(7, 38) = 3.76, p < .05$, and career centrality, $F(9, 38) = 15.84, p < .001$, were each meaningfully related to the mothers' work adaptation following the first childbirth. A similar regression model for fathers is presented in Table 6.

Table 4
Summary of hierarchical regression analysis predicting the length of paternity leave

Predictors	Beta	R	ΔR^2	ΔF
Planned pregnancy	.30*	.25	.07	3.87*
Employer's reaction	-.26*	.35	.06	3.75*
Infant difficult temperament	-.18	.39	.02	1.02
Preoccupation with infant	.19	.43	.03	1.61
Marital support	.21 [†]	.48	.04	3.81*
Parent depression	.03	.48	.00	0.13
Family salience	.25*	.54	.08	4.03*
R^2 total = .30, $F(7, 40) = 2.86, p < .05$				

* $p < .05$. [†] $p < .10$.

Table 5
Summary of hierarchical regression analysis predicting mothers' work adaptation

Predictors	Beta	R	ΔR^2	ΔF
Child age	.00	.02	.00	0.19
SES	-.27 [†]	.14	.04	1.38
Length of leave	.08	.27	.03	1.26
Work hours	-.21*	.36	.05	3.72*
Childcare quality	.14	.40	.03	1.71
Marital support	.28*	.47	.06	3.92*
Parent depression	-.20*	.59	.06	3.76*
Career centrality	.65**	.70	.20	15.84**
R^2 total = .47, $F(9, 38) = 4.74$, $p < .001$				

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. [†] $p < .10$.

Results reported in Table 6 indicate that the two covariates—child age, $F(1, 38) = 4.68$, $p < .05$, and SES, $F(2, 38) = 6.99$, $p < .01$ —were each significantly predictive of fathers' work adaptation. Fathers of younger infants and of lower SES reported better work adaptation. In addition, higher father marital support, $F(6, 38) = 4.87$, $p < .05$, and higher career centrality, $F(9, 38) = 5.18$, $p < .05$, were each predictive of the fathers' work adaptation.

Finally, in line with research reporting more interactive effects of the length of maternity leave than main effects (Hyde et al., 2001), two additional regression models predicting work adaptation for mothers and fathers were conducted. Each included two interaction terms: length of leave and SES, and length of leave and childcare quality. In each regression, the three main effects were entered first (length of leave, SES, childcare quality) followed by the two interaction terms. The model predicting maternal work adaptation was significant, R^2 total = .38, $F(5, 42) = 5.35$, $p < .001$. While no significant findings emerged for the main effects, each interaction term explained unique variance: length of leave and SES, $\Delta R^2 = .07$, $F(1, 43)$

Table 6
Summary of hierarchical regression analysis predicting fathers' work adaptation

Predictors	Beta	R	ΔR^2	ΔF
Child age	-.39*	.33	.11	4.68*
SES	-.47**	.50	.14	6.99**
Length of leave	-.22	.52	.02	1.42
Work hours	-.21	.53	.01	0.51
Childcare quality	.13	.54	.00	0.32
Marital support	.27*	.61	.08	4.87*
Parent depression	-.14	.62	.01	0.56
Career centrality	.31*	.66	.06	5.18*
R^2 total = .45, $F(8, 39) = 4.93$, $p < .001$				

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

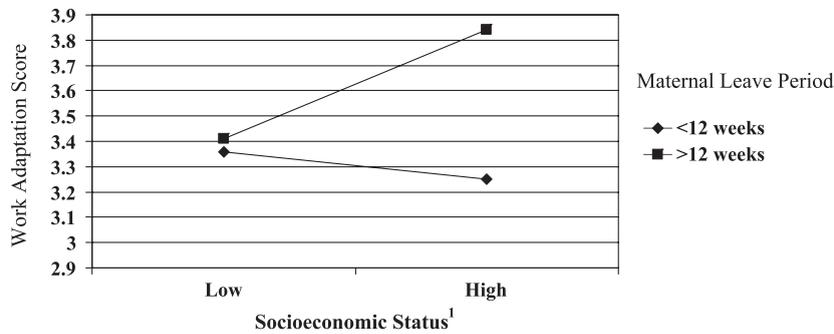


Fig. 1. Parents' work adaptation following a short (<12 weeks) or long (>12 weeks) maternity leave when infants are placed in high versus low perceived childcare quality.

= 3.76, $p < .05$; and length of leave and childcare quality, $\Delta R^2 = .26$, $F(1, 42) = 17.06$, $p < .01$. Results for fathers showed a significant overall model: R^2 total = .24, $F(5, 42) = 2.65$, $p < .05$. A significant main effect was found for SES: $\Delta R^2 = .07$, $F(1, 46) = 3.75$, $p < .05$; and the interaction of childcare quality and length of paternity leave explained unique variance, $\Delta R^2 = .10$, $F(1, 42) = 5.08$, $p < .05$.

To better understand the interaction effects, childcare quality and SES were each divided using a median split. For childcare quality, data from mothers and fathers were combined, as the interaction contributed meaningfully to both models. When parents perceived the quality of childcare as high, no difference was found between families where mothers took longer or shorter leaves. However, when infants were placed in perceived low-quality care, work adaptation was higher in the longer-leave group, $F(1, 54) = 4.63$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.092$ (see Fig. 1). These findings point to the risk imposed by a short maternity leave in the context of other risk factors, such as childcare quality, for parental adaptation to reemployment. Perceived childcare quality was negatively related to the number of children, $r = -.22$, $p < .05$, and caregivers, $r = -.38$, $p < .001$, at the childcare facility.

The interaction of maternity leave and SES was examined for mothers only. The length of leave did not have an effect on work adaptation in the lower SES group of this upper-middle class sample (Hollingshead = 25–53), but had a significant effect on work adaptation in the higher SES group (Hollingshead = 54–69), $F(1, 23) = 3.84$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.084$. These findings (see Fig. 2) show that high

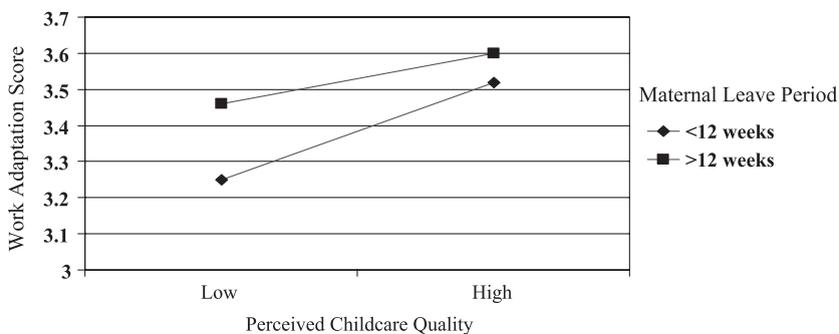


Fig. 2. Mothers' work adaptation following a short (<12 weeks) or long (>12 weeks) maternity leave among mothers of higher and lower SES status. ¹High and low SES status refer to the higher and lower ends of a relatively high SES sample, respectively.

SES mothers who took longer leaves adapted better to work compared to high SES mothers who took shorter leaves.

To further examine the interaction of SES and length of leave, we explored differences in the experiences and attitudes between first-time mothers in the two SES groups. Mothers in the lower SES group of this upper-middle class sample were younger, $F(1, 48) = 5.12, p < .05, \eta^2 = 0.153$, reported lower career centrality, $F(1, 48) = 6.57, p < .05, \eta^2 = 0.123$, and endorsed more traditional sex-roles attitudes, $F(1, 48) = 5.37, p < .05, \eta^2 = 0.107$. These findings point to the special risk of a short maternity leave among mothers of high SES who place more centrality on their career and are guided by a more egalitarian worldview.

4. Discussion

Results of this study are among the first to reveal the multiple risk and resiliency factors in relation to the length of maternity and paternity leave and the parents' subsequent adaptation to reemployment among dual-earner parents at the transition to parenthood. Guided by a systemic and ecological approach—the most conducive framework to view the topic of parental leave (Hyde et al., 2001; Zigler, Frank, & Emmel, 1988)—the findings demonstrate that longer maternity and paternity leaves and better work adaptation are associated with more optimal personal, marital, and social–contextual factors. In general, parents in this low-risk sample reported positive effects of the birth on their self-esteem and marriage, typical preoccupation with the infant during that stage, and interest in infant developmental milestones. The better adaptation among parents who took longer leaves point to the role of society in supporting young couples during this important transition by affording longer periods of unoccupied parental involvement with the infant and the formation of the family.

Mothers who took shorter leaves (<12 weeks) were less knowledgeable of infant development or actively searching information on developmental issues, perceived their infant as more difficult, considered the birth to have a less positive impact on their self-esteem and marriage, received less support from their husbands, and reported higher career centrality. In line with the theoretical positions of Brazelton (1986) and Bronfenbrenner (1988), a short parental leave was associated with both mothers' and fathers' reduced preoccupation with their infant. Brazelton (1986) considers the first months of the infant's life as an important period for the parents to gradually adapt to the infant's biorhythms and communicative signals, and charts four stages in this process of familiarization. By the first 4–6 weeks, a point when many mothers return to work and the vast majority of fathers have already been reemployed for a time, only the first stage of parental involvement has been accomplished. Thus, a short maternity leave appears to be related to less optimal parenting. The findings point to the need to provide a paid maternity leave for at least 12 weeks and longer leaves for fathers. Furthermore, if a short leave is associated with more difficult adaptation among married, middle-class parents of healthy infants, it may have a far worse effect on the well-being of single mothers, unsupported families, or families raising a sick or premature infant.

Examination of the individual, marital, and social–contextual factors associated with the length of parental leave and work adaptation revealed both parent-specific and general correlates. Among the individual correlates, we examined parental depression and attitudes toward work and family. In general, lower depression was linked to better adaptation among women but not among men. Higher maternal depression was associated with shorter maternity leaves and lower adaptation to reemployment, as well as with lower maternal preoccupation with the infant and reduced marital support. The findings are

consistent with previous research on the relations between maternal depression and reduced social support, perception of infant difficulty, lower preoccupation with the infant, shorter maternity leaves, higher maternal stress, and less optimal mother–infant interaction among married and single mothers, particularly at the transition to parenthood (Cutrona & Troutman, 1986; Feldman, 2003; Feldman et al., 2001; Gjerdingen & Chaloner, 1994; Goldberg, Greenberger, Hamill, & O’Neil, 1992; Leckman et al., 1999). Depression is the most prevalent risk among women in the postpartum period (Burt & Stein, 2002) and carries long-term negative effects on infant development in the cognitive, social, and emotional domains (Goodman & Gotlieb, 1999). The present findings, which demonstrate the links between maternal depression in the postpartum period and shorter maternity leaves and lower work adaptation, address the role of a longer maternity leave as a potential buffer against maternal stress and depression.

Another important individual correlate of the length of parental leave and work adaptation was the salience of the work and family roles. Mothers and fathers who reported higher career centrality, expressed in striving for professional achievement, competitiveness at work, consideration of work as central to their self-definition, and satisfaction with progress on the career track, adapted better to reemployment at the transition to parenthood. As suggested by the “work–family role system” model (Pleck, 1985), the centrality attributed to a role is important to the person’s functioning at that role, and the findings demonstrate that during the transition to parenthood higher career centrality is associated with better work functioning, regardless of the parent’s gender. Helms-Erikson, Tanner, Crouter, and McHale (2000) found that the mother’s interpretation of her work role, in terms of status, attitudes toward breadwinning, and ambivalence toward coproviding, was related to maternal depression and the marital relationships and suggested that the woman’s subjective appraisal of her work role is an important determinant in family adjustment. However, because of the complementarity of the work and family roles (Pleck, 1985), a very high involvement in the career aspect may come on account of the parent’s investment in the family during the earliest stages of family formation. Previous research suggests that whereas maternal functioning in the work role did not interfere with her family functioning, increased career centrality of fathers was related to less optimal coparenting and less harmonious family interactions (Feldman et al., 2001). It is thus important to examine the links between the parent’s functioning in the work role and other aspects of the emerging family, including coparenting and the parent–infant relationship.

Work and family role centrality were also associated with the length of maternity and paternity leave, but different patterns emerged for women and men. Among mothers, higher career centrality predicted shorter leaves, with no associations between leave taking and family salience. For fathers, higher family centrality predicted longer leaves and no relations emerged between career centrality and the length of leave. Since mothers are still the main caregivers, tend to take longer leaves than their husbands, and are viewed by society and their family as responsible for infant care (Grych & Clark, 1999; Han & Waldfogel, 2003), it is possible that middle-class mothers—who may not need immediate employment for livelihood—must have a high investment in their career to return to work immediately after birth. Fathers, who are not expected to take long leaves, may need a special focus on the family to take longer leaves. However, due to the correlational design of the study, it is impossible to know whether the father’s decision to take a longer leave resulted in higher family centrality, the mother’s initial career centrality determined her early return to work, or whether a longer leave diminished maternal investment in the career aspects or increased the father’s family salience. Possibly, the parent’s work and family attitudes interacted with leave-taking behavior in a

mutually influencing manner, which shaped both the length of leave and the parent's attitudes toward the work and family roles.

The marital predictor—the father's physical and emotional support to his wife—was found to be the most consistent predictor, uniquely related to the length of both maternity and paternity leaves and to the work adaptation of both mother and father. These findings highlight the father's support as central to family adaptation at the transition to parenthood. The findings for mothers are consistent with research on spousal support at the transition to parenthood and its importance for the woman's adjustment to the maternal role (Belsky, 1984; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Cutrona, 1984) and to a more optimal balance between the work and family roles (Hughes et al., 1992). Fathers who provided more support to their wives also reported higher family salience, took longer leaves, were more preoccupied with their infants, and adapted better to work following the first childbirth. These data are consistent with theoretical models suggesting that the development of fathering is more closely linked to the marital and family relationship than is mothering (Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Feldman, 2000). Research also points to the role of father involvement and marital satisfaction in shaping infants' social–emotional growth, particularly among dual-earner families (Feldman, 2000; Feldman, Nash, & Aschenbrenner, 1983) and in affording better father adaptation to the work role at the transition to parenthood (Feldman et al., 2001). Interestingly, whether the pregnancy was planned or not predicted the length of paternity, but not maternity leave, pointing to the associations between the father's initial investment in the idea of becoming a father and the length of leave. Social policies affording fathers easier access to leave, more accepting attitudes in the workplace, and a paid leave may lead to longer paternity leave and more positive adjustment of the new family to dual-earner parenthood.

With regards to the social–contextual factors, employment conditions were related to the mother's work adaptation, including shorter work hours and better childcare quality, and the findings are consistent with previous research (Feldman et al., 2001; Hyde et al., 2001). Thus, opportunities for part-time employment and affordable high-quality care are likely to increase the job performance of new mothers (Galinsky et al., 1996). The fact that employment conditions were unrelated to father work adaptation may suggest that even among dual-earner families mothers still consider themselves as responsible for infant care.

Consistent with previous research (Hyde et al., 2001), the length of parental leave did not have a direct effect on maternal or paternal work adaptation but interacted with other factors in predicting adaptation to the work role. The interaction of low childcare quality and short maternity leave in predicting work adaptation is consistent with the multirisk perspective on the length of maternity leave (Zigler, Frank, & Emmel, 1988). In the context of long work hours, lower marital support, and higher depression, a short maternity leave combined with low perceived quality of care may interfere with maternal adaptation. Results of a large national project on childcare quality (NICHD Early Child Care Research Networks, 1997) indicate that low quality of childcare interacts with maternal insensitivity in predicting attachment insecurity, pointing to the risk imposed by low childcare quality in the context of other family risk factors. The major determinant in the quality of childcare was found to be the adult-to-child ratio (NICHD Early Child Care Research Networks, 2000), and the present findings demonstrate that perceived childcare quality was related to the number of adults and children at the childcare setting. Perceived childcare quality has also been associated with the well-being and level of work stress among single mothers (Goldberg et al., 1992), highlighting the importance of childcare in all SES groups. It thus appears that parents are able to assess the quality

of childcare adequately and the findings point to the importance of the parents' security with regards to their infant's safety for their adaptation and job performance. The interaction of length of leave and SES in predicting maternal work adaptation may be related to the fact that lower SES mothers may not have a choice with regards to the length of leave and may adapt to a given situation, whereas higher SES mothers may have more options to time their return and may thus be more ambivalent about reemployment.

Although fathers took significantly shorter leaves than their wives, the employer's attitude toward child-rearing appears to be an important factor in the father's leave-taking. Thus, changing social attitudes and educating the public on the significance of father involvement may be important to fathers and families. Friedman and Galinsky (1992) argue that attention to family needs and easier work conditions should become a business concern, not only the concern of parents. According to their model, the work–family issue should be viewed from a life-time perspective, with the assumption that all employees will experience work–family interference at some point in life, and the transition to parenthood is among the most stressful period for the dual-earner family. Goldberg, Greenberger, Koch-Jones, and O'Neil (1989) showed that a supportive corporate atmosphere and employer-supported childcare benefits were among the main predictors of the parents' job satisfaction and lower work stress. Similarly, research from Scandinavian countries (Brandth & Kvande, 2002; Haas, 1992) has shown that the introduction of a paid paternity leave slowly changed public opinions on fathering and altered employers' attitudes toward paternity leave. At the transition to parenthood, men become preoccupied with their role as breadwinners and anxious as to their capacity to provide for the new family (Cohen, 1987). Although working fathers have been increasingly reporting the family as a central source of well-being and express a growing desire for involvement in child-rearing (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997), the burden of providing for the new family may place higher stress on the work domain. Longer paternity leave may thus be possible only in the context of a more supportive corporate atmosphere toward fatherhood. As seen in the current data set, the employer's positive reaction to childbirth was related to lower state anxiety among fathers and to the father's marital support, findings that point to the role of society in supporting fathers who can, in turn, provide more support to their wives and infants.

The main limitation of this study is the fact that the sample included only upper-middle class first-time couples. The findings, therefore, need further examination before generalization to other populations, such as low SES or single mother-headed families, can be made. Further research is required to chart the individual, marital, and societal correlates of parental leave and work adaptation among different segments of the population.

Finally, the present results have clear implications for social policy. Most married women with small infants are currently employed and the numbers of working mothers are rapidly increasing. These numbers are in addition to most single mothers who must return to work shortly after birth. As indicated by a recent survey (Han & Waldfogel, 2003), the unpaid leave provided by Family and Medical Leave Act (1993) did not alter the leave-taking behavior of new parents. To assist parents during this stressful transition, society must provide more benevolent leave policies and create public opinions that support longer parental leaves, particularly in the workplace. Family adjustment during the transition to parenthood bears important consequences to family intactness and child development. For a healthy society, adequate conditions must be granted to parents to facilitate a smoother transition to dual-earner parenthood.

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