

PARENTS' SELF-IMAGES AND AT-RISK PREGNANCIES: A PILOT RESEARCH

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In our paper, attention was focused on the primary triangle made up of mother, father and child, in order to study the meaning of being parents in complex situations like an at-risk pregnancy, or pregnancies with a high probability of premature birth within the thirty-second and thirty-seventh week of gestation (OMS, 1977).

Therefore, our study pointed out to parents' self-images during at-risk pregnancies, which are considered as negative experiences that can affect the process of construction of parental image representation, with respect to the birth and development of the parent-child relationship.

Three areas were analyzed: (1) the reconstruction of male and female self-images as being fathers/mothers and the representation of their children's images during an at-risk pregnancy. To that purpose, we used specific clinical measures, such as verbal semi-structured interviews and graphic-projective tests (IRMAG, Rap.Pa.G, Differenziale Semantico – Semantic Differential, La doppia Luna – The double Moon); (2) the comparison between parents' self-images either as males and females or as having a parental role, and representation of their children's images during an at-risk pregnancy; (3) the comparison between the parental self-images deriving from the fact of being parents either for the first time or for the second time.

This pilot research included 10 couples aged 25-40, at their first or second parental experience. In particular, all the women admitted to a Palermo-based hospital presented with a pregnancy-related disease.

Based on a global analysis of results, we assumed that the majority of women and a lower percentage of men built their own self-images and that of their children in a not-so-well defined manner.

In particular, we found that women tried to avoid at-risk pregnancy-related crises by activating defence mechanisms, such as rationalization and denial; these mechanisms, in turn, engendered emotional withdrawal and a slightly better defined representation of their children's images. We also found feelings of inadequacy in the male group, the tendency to be anxious, especially for women, because of experiencing distress and the pervasive concerns related to their children's health.

Moreover, those couples who had already experienced another pregnancy tended to compare the first event with the second one, and had higher difficulties in elaborating the event than the couples who experienced a pregnancy for the first time.

The type of pregnancy-related disease as well as the bond between parents seemed to have affected participants' self-images.

Evidence from this study has spurred further research, with the aim to ascertain whether parents' self-images might undergo any changes following the premature birth, as well as whether such self-image representations might be affected by the interaction with the "born" child.

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