

The quality of family interactions and marital satisfaction from pregnancy to the child's age of 10 years: A preliminary report.

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Abstract. Family-level interactions became over last years one of the main focus of developmental and clinical research in developmental psychology and psychopathology. Since the demonstration of the emergence of triadic competences at the child's 12 weeks of life, the role of triadic interactions in family functioning have been observed from different theoretical and methodological approaches, usually focusing on newborn families and the early infancy of the child. In this work, we will present a preliminary report about the development of the quality of family interactions and marital satisfaction, from pregnancy to the child's age of 10 years. Family interactions were assessed on 14 non-referred families using the Lausanne Trilogue Play (LTP) paradigm and marital adjustment was assessed using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS). Results show that family interactions improve from pregnancy until the 9th month and then remain stable until school age. The mother's perception of marital satisfaction, instead, continuously decreases over time.

Keywords: family, interactions, Lausanne Trilogue Play, marital satisfaction, developmental trend, longitudinal.

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Introduction

Literature in the field of developmental psychology and psychopathology shows an increasing interest in the study of parental competences and family interactions, both with research purposes and for clinical implications. Recent studies about child's early communicative competences demonstrated that at 12 weeks of life the child is able to interact with more than one person at the same time (Fivaz-Depeursinge, Favez, Lavanchy-Scaiola, De Noni, & Frascarolo, 2005; Nadel & Tremblay-Leveau, 1999). These triadic skills seem to emerge simultaneously with dyadic communicative competences, following their own trajectories and having peculiar features (Tremblay-Leveau, 1999). The focus on the mother-child relationship, as the main determinant for the child's personality development, has been gradually enhanced with the inclusion of the father (Parent, Forehand, Pomerantz, Peisch, & Seehuus, 2017), thanks to the adoption of a systemic approach (Bateson, 1972; Minuchin, 1985) which considers the child strictly in relation to his growth environment.

The family systems theory, in fact, stressed the need to consider the family as a whole, considering inadequate to study the child's growth environment as a sum of his most significant dyadic relations.

Due to these findings, research and clinical work based on the child's relational processes shifted the attention from a dyadic perspective to a triadic one, introducing a new unit of analysis: the mother-father-infant triad (Fivaz-Depeursinge, 1989; Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery, 1999). In line with this approach, researchers on this field started studying characteristics and implications of triadic family interactions on the child's well-being. By now, several aspects of family functioning have been deepened and investigated from different approaches. The common assumption is that the quality of parent-child interactions varies depending on the presence or absence of the other parent (Parke & O'Leary, 1976) and keeping in mind that from the early infancy the child has an active role in three-ways exchanges (Stern, 2005; Walsh, 2009).

The quality of family triadic interactions has been investigated in relation to individual parental features and competences. Recently, in a study about the association between the quality of family interactions and paternal sensitivity (Tissot, Favez, Udry-Jorgensen, Frascarolo, & Despland, 2015), family alliance appeared strictly related to the sensitive competences of both mothers and fathers, especially during the early postpartum period. In the same direction, Marcu, Oppenheim, and Koren-Karie (2016) showed that parental insightfulness improves the degree of family cooperation and the quality of co-parenting, especially in triads in which both parents create a

synergic insightful orientation. Beyond real parental competences, also the sense of competences of mothers and fathers and their beliefs on parental roles are able to predict co-parenting and child engagement until 18 months of life, in different ways depending on his developmental stage (Favez, Tissot, Frascarolo, Stiefel, & Despland, 2016).

Beside the individual contribution of each parent, the quality of the marital relationship was examined in association to the family level of interactions. For example, the triadic approach was applied to the study of interparental conflicts. Du RocherSchudlich et al. (2015) observed parents discussing about a conflictual theme in the presence or absence of their little child, showing that the parents' manner to manage the conflict did not differ in the two situations. But the quality of marital relationship seems to be strictly associated to the quality of family interactions, especially in conflicting conditions. In families with 2-years-old children, the presence of competitive co-parenting resulted significantly associated with negative affectivity and family conflict, while cooperative co-parenting was not related to family interactions (Murphy, Jacobvitz, & Hazen, 2016). In addition, competitive co-parenting resulted predictive of the children's later development of externalizing problems, suggesting that the knowledge about these associations has relevant implications in terms of child's well-being.

All of the studies above-mentioned analysed triadic interactions using observational methods focused on different aspects of family-level interactions. One of the most popular and widespread methods is the observational paradigm called Lausanne Trilogue Play (Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery, 1999), which codifies triadic interactions in terms of Family Alliance (the degree of coordination that mother-father-infant system shows during a joint task). According to this procedure (described further below), triads are asked to play together, as they usually do at home, with a joint goal and respecting few rules. These rules allow the observation of all interactive configurations: one parent plays with the child while the other one remains simply present; the whole triad plays together; parents interact while the child remains simply present.

The application of this paradigm has increased the knowledge about the quality of family interactions and its relation with parental factors. Maternal and paternal individual representations of mother-child and father-child interactions, assessed at 3, 9, and 18 months of child's life, predict early co-parenting support, as observed within the triadic setting of LTP paradigm (Favez, Tissot, & Frascarolo, 2016). A longitudinal study about the effects of parental depression shows that maternal symptomatology has a negative impact on the development of healthy family-level relations, in terms of a reduction of coparental support at 18 months of child's life (Tissot, Favez,

Ghisletta, Frascarolo, & Despland, 2016). In addition, marital correlates have been investigated in association with the LTP performance. Marital satisfaction trends are proved to be related to the development of quality of family interactions (Favez, Frascarolo, & Fivaz-Depeursinge, 2006); moreover, the quality of marital relationship acts as a moderator between parental psychopathology and latter child's outcomes (Favez, Tissot, Frascarolo, & Fivaz-Depeursinge, 2014). These authors found that parental sensitivity towards the child changes depending on the presence or absence of the other parent (Udry-Jorgensen, Tissot, Frascarolo, Despland, & Favez, 2016), thus confirming the importance to involve the whole triad in the study of family processes.

Inspired by the innovative work conducted in this field using the Lausanne Triogue Play procedure and based on the assumption of the early development of triadic interactive abilities in children, our work group adopted the perspectives and approach of the LTP paradigm. Our ambition was to propose the LTP paradigm within the Italian population with a dual objective: (a) to compare the validity of the instrument assessed in the Swiss context by applying it to a different culture, and (b) to explore for the first time the development of quality of family interactions in an Italian normative sample. The present report relies on a wider longitudinal study started in 2006 on the transition to parenthood and the development of family interactive abilities.

In our previous studies, the application of the prenatal LTP to the Italian population confirmed the cross-cultural validity of this method (Simonelli, Bighin, & De Palo, 2012), showing results comparable to the original application and validation of the procedure (Carneiro, Corboz-Warnery, & Fivaz-Depeursinge, 2006): internal consistency of the five prenatal scales was good (Cronbach's alpha = .78). In addition, the postnatal LTP was validated in the Italian context showing good psychometric properties: Cronbach's alpha = .97 at 4th month of child's life; Cronbach's alpha = .95 at 9th month (Simonelli, Bighin, & De Palo, 2013).

So far, our longitudinal analyses have focused on the trend of triadic interactions, from pregnancy to the preschool age of the first child, through the application of a multilevel Growth Model. Through that model, we found that the quality of family interactions follows developmental trajectories from pregnancy to the 9th month of child's life (Simonelli, De Palo, & Bighin, 2014). In addition, this statistical effect emerged also from pregnancy to the pre-school age (Simonelli, Parolin, Sacchi, De Palo, & Vieno, 2016), supporting an improvement of triadic interactions across the child's growth and excluding the hypothesis of stability of family alliance (Favez et al., 2006). Also examined was the construct of marital satisfaction over the same

period, and a decline in couple's adjustment from pregnancy until 30 months of the postnatal period was detected. In addition, this decline was related to the simultaneous improvement of the quality of family interactions. Given these results, this paper will present the investigation of the trend of family interactions and marital satisfaction from pregnancy until the school age of the first child.

The main purpose of this preliminary report is to observe the development of the quality of family interactions from pregnancy to the school age of the first child, with close proximity to the transition to adolescence. Specific aims of this study are:

(i) to analyse the development of the quality of family interaction, measured through the administration of the LTP procedure (Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery, 1999), from pregnancy to the school-age stage: our hypothesis is to confirm the developmental trend emerged in our previous analyses (Simonelli et al., 2014; Simonelli et al., 2016) and detect a continuity of the improvement of family interactions;

(ii) to analyse the development of the quality of family interactions, using the LTP procedure, during the post-natal period, from the 4th month of child's life to the school-age follow-up: we hypothesize that the quality of family interactions increases over this period, in line with results of our previous studies (Simonelli, Fava Vizziello, Bighin, & Petech, 2010);

(iii) to analyse the construct of dyadic adjustment perceived by each parent, measured through the DAS self-report (Spanier, 1976), and its evolution from pregnancy to the school-age stage: given the reduction of marital satisfaction emerged in previous studies (Simonelli et al., 2016; Mitnick, Heyman, & SmithSlep, 2009), we suppose a decrease of this construct.

Method

Participants and method

Results presented in this paper refer to a 10-year follow-up of the longitudinal project above mentioned about the quality of family interactions during the transition to parenthood. The following preliminary report concerns 14 non-referred families, a small portion of the bigger sample of families (N = 96) who agreed to participate in this study when recruitment was conducted, in 2006. These families were recruited during the pregnancy of their first child and assessed during different stages (7th month of pregnancy, 4th, 9th and 48th month of child's life) in order to analyse the transition from the couple to the family triad and the development of family interactions during this period. In 2016, families who had completed the

entire protocol (N = 41) were contacted to plan a further appointment during the school age of their child. Although at the moment we collected data from 14 families, it is important to state, however, that recruitment process is still ongoing.

The families of this group have been assessed with both self-report questionnaires and observational procedures (Table 1). At the 7th month of pregnancy, we administered the prenatal LTP (Carneiro et al., 2006) to assess co-parental alliance and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS, Spanier, 1976) for the analysis of marital satisfaction. At 4th, 9th, 18th and 38th/48th months of child's life we administered the postnatal LTP (Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery, 1999) to assess the quality of family interactions, DAS and the Questionnaire of Father Involvement (Frascarolo, 1994, unpublished) for the assessment of the father's role in caregiving. At the school-age follow-up, we respect the protocol of previous stages, however - considering that data collection is still in progress - in this report results from the administration of postnatal LTP and DAS will be presented.

Table 1

Methods and sample's size over the longitudinal design

| Stage | Pregnancy | 4th month | 9th month | 38th/48th months | Follow-up 10 years |
|-------------------|---|--|--|--|----------------------------------|
| Instrument | Pre-natal LTP DAS | Post-natal LTP DAS Father Involvement Questionnaire | Post-natal LTP DAS Father Involvement Questionnaire | Post-natal LTP DAS Father Involvement Questionnaire | Post-natal LTP DAS |
| Sample | N = 96 couples (93.2% of the initial sample | N = 87 couples (84.5% of the initial sample) | N = 76 couples (73,78 % of the initial sample) | N = 41 couples (43,98 % of the initial sample) | N = 14 <i>in progress</i> |

At the school-age stage, the mothers' age ranged from 38 to 50 years old ($M_{age} = 44.46$, $S = 3.33$), the fathers ranged from 41 to 53 years old (M_{age}

= 46.54, $SD = 4.70$) and the children's (8 males and 6 females) from 9 to 13 years old ($M_{age} = 10.71$, $SD = 1.68$). The median level of education was secondary school diploma, for both mothers and fathers (range = secondary school-university). The entire longitudinal project was approved by the General Assembly of the Italian Association of Psychology, in accordance with the recommendations of the Code of Ethics.

Materials and methods of collecting data

Given the aims of this preliminary report, the quality of family interactions through the observation of the Lausanne Trilogue Play (LTP) paradigm was assessed, and the level of marital satisfaction was investigated by administering a self-report questionnaire, the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS).

The LTP procedure: post-natal version (Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery, 1999). Lausanne Trilogue Play is a semi-standardised paradigm built by the Lausanne work group, for the evaluation of the quality of triadic interactions. This procedure allows the observation of specific interactive competences of the mother-father-child system during a brief play session in an ad-hoc setting. By following four simple rules, family members are invited to sit around a table, forming an equilateral triangle, and to play as they usually do at home. The rules are stated as follows; at the beginning one parent plays with the child while the other stays simply present; in a second moment, parents reverse their roles; after that, both parents play together with the child; and finally, parents talk together while the child stays simply present. The entire interaction is video-taped and last about 15 minutes. Subsequently, the video is examined according to the Family Alliance Assessments Scales (FAAS 4.0; Lavanchy-Scaiola et al., 2006, unpublished), a coding system that analyses ten interactive variables, rated on a 1-5 Likert scale:

“Postures: the basic level of interactions; it describes the “readiness to interact” signals and indicates the engagement in the interaction. *Gaze orientation*: mutual gaze orientation among family members; *Inclusion of partners*: the reciprocal interpersonal engagement within the group as a whole. *Support and cooperation between parents (co-parenting)*: the support parents give/offer one another. *Implication of each partner in his/her role*: the position by which individuals modulate their involvement without breaking out of the interaction. *Parental scaffolding*: parents' supervision of the child and appropriate stimulation to keep him/her engaged. *Infant's involvement*: extent to which the child's signals are clear and interpretable

by the parent. *Co-construction*: inter-attentiveness, that is sharing a common object of attention through the orientation of the gaze or a common subject of discussion; *Sensitivity*: empathic emotional reactions, or sensitivity. *Family warmth*: the emotional characteristics that are most favourable to interaction, associated with optimal child development” (McHale & Rasmussen, 1998; Simonelli et al., 2016).

The LTP procedure: prenatal version (Carneiro et al., 2006). The prenatal version of LTP was used to observe the co-parental alliance, and for this work was administered at the 7th month of pregnancy. This version respects the same setting with four interactive configurations, based on the methodological scheme of the postnatal LTP. Future parents do not play with the real baby but with a neutral doll with the typical size and shape of a newborn. Such “neutrality” should help the parents-to-be to role-play the situation. This version took about 5 minutes and its coding system consists of five scales assessed on a Likert Scale ranging from 1 to 5:

“*Co-Parent Playfulness* that assesses a couple’s capacity to create a playful space and to co-construct a game. *Structure of the Play* that assesses the couple’s capacity to structure the four play segments according to the instructions. Two dimensions are considered: the differentiation of the play into four discrete segments and the duration of the entire play sequence, as well as of the four segments. *Intuitive Parenting Behaviors* that assesses the parent’s use of intuitive parenting behaviors. (...) These intuitive parenting behaviors are assessed as present or absent for each parent separately. The coding system offers a score for each parent, then these scores are summed up to obtain a global score for the couple. (...). *Couple’s Cooperation* that assesses - at a behavioral level - the degree of active cooperation between the parents during the play; the absence of antagonism or interference is not enough to attain a high score. *Family Warmth* that captures the affection and humor shared by the partners during play (...)” (Simonelli et al., 2014).

Given the aims of this work, only the prenatal LTP total score, which represents the sum of all prenatal LTP variables was considered.

DAS (Spanier, 1976; Italian version by Gentili, Contreras, Cassaniti, & D’Arista, 2002). It is a self-report questionnaire, which provides a measure of relationship adjustment. It allows the investigation of the degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction perceived by each partner regarding his or her marital relationship. Administering the questionnaire to the couple, it is possible to compare the perceptions of each partner, analysing similarities or discrepancies in what they experience. 32 items proposing questions and statements about typical marital activities, behaviours and feelings compose DAS. Some items are dichotomous (yes/no), others are rated on different

Likert scales according to the degree of satisfaction (0-7), the degree and the frequency of agreement (0-5) and the frequency of given activities, behaviours or feelings (0-4). The coding system allows the scoring of 4 subscales (Consensus, Affectional Expression, Satisfaction, Cohesion) and a total score as a measure of the couples' degree of general agreement. For this study, the Italian version of the scale, translated and validated by Gentili et al. (2002) was utilised.

Results

Given the small size of the sample, we conducted non-parametric analyses on the data collected.

For the first objective of this work, the development of the quality of family interactions across all stages, from pregnancy to the school-age step, was examined: the Friedman test has been applied to detect the effect of time considering the LTP total score of each stage. The test reveals no significant differences over time. The trajectory of quality of family interactions follows an increase until the 9th month and a decrease from the 9th month to the school-age stage, but these variations are not significant.

As a second objective, we concentrated on understanding the development of the quality of family interactions after the child's birth: thus, the Friedman test with the exclusion of the total score of the prenatal LTP was repeated. Results show no significant differences from the 4th month of the child's life to the school age period. However, focusing on single scores of each variable presented in the LTP coding system, it became evident that the scale of Infant's involvement changes significantly over time. The Friedman test, in fact, detects a significant time effect, in terms of a growth of child's involvement, from the 4th month to the pre-school stage and a decrease from pre-school to school-age period ($X^2 = 9.483$, $df = 3$, $p = .024$). No time effect was observed for other LTP variables, as shown in Table 2.

Figure 1 shows the trend of the variable Infant's involvement over time.

Table 2

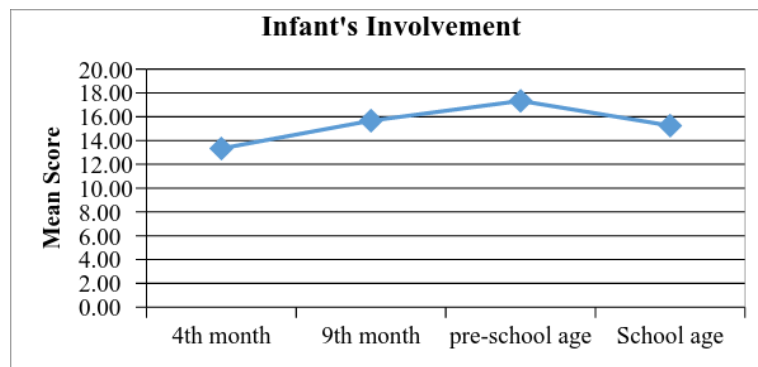
Friedman Test on LTP variables over time

| Variable | Time Effect (X ²) | df | p value |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------|----|---------|
| Postures | 1.15 | 3 | .765 |
| Gaze orientation | 2.84 | 3 | .417 |
| Inclusion of partners | 5.15 | 3 | .161 |
| Support and cooperation | 3.94 | 3 | .286 |
| Roles | 1.17 | 3 | .760 |
| Parental scaffolding | 3.74 | 3 | .291 |
| Infant's Involvement | 9.48 | 3 | .024* |
| Co-construction | .838 | 3 | .840 |
| Sensitivity | 4.70 | 3 | .195 |
| Family Warmth | 4.63 | 3 | .201 |

* $p < .05$

Figure 1

Trend of Infant's Involvement

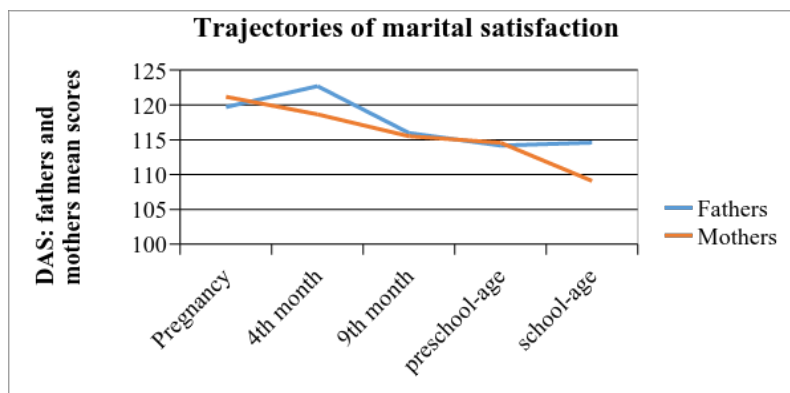


The Spearman's Correlations analysis was performed in order to examine the associations between each LTP variable of the school-age stage and each LTP variable of previous stages. Results revealed a significant positive correlation between the variable Inclusion of partners of the school-age stage and the following variables at the 9th months of child's life: Postures ($\rho_s = .602, p = .038$), Implication of each partner in his/her role ($\rho_s = .579, p = .048$), and Parental scaffolding ($\rho_s = .580, p = .048$).

The third step of this study is focused on the development of dyadic adjustment over time, verified through the application of the Friedman test. Also, under examination were the fathers' DAS total score and the mothers' DAS total score of each stage, as measures of the couples' degree of general agreement perceived by each partner. Results showed no significant variance among the fathers' scores over time. The mothers' perception of marital adjustment, instead, changed significantly across stages ($X^2 = 13.153, df = 4, p = .011$): a significant decrease of the DAS total score is registered from pregnancy to the school age of the first child, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

DAS mean scores for fathers and mothers over time



Wilcoxon signed-rank tests confirmed the significant decrease of the mothers' marital satisfaction from pregnancy to the school-age stage ($Z = -2.670, p = .008$). Deepening the postpartum period, the level of mothers' and fathers' marital satisfaction at 4 months of child's life did not differ significantly with respect to the 9th month and the pre-school stages, but there

is a significant decrease for both mothers and fathers at the school-age stage (for mothers, $Z = -2.197, p = .028$; for fathers, $Z = -2.140, p = .032$).

Wondering about the relations among different longitudinal stages in terms of dyadic adjustment, we applied Spearman's correlations to DAS total scores, both for fathers and mothers, comparing the school age time with all previous stages. Following this, we found that for both partners all DAS scores are significantly related over time, showing a positive linear relation (Table 3).

Table 3

DAS total scores over time: Spearman's correlations

| | | Scholar age Fathers | | Scholar age Mothers | |
|------------------------------|--------|---------------------|-------|---------------------|-------|
| | | Spearman Rho | Sign. | Spearman Rho | Sign. |
| pregnancy | father | .804** | .002 | .755** | .005 |
| | mother | .690* | .013 | .739** | .006 |
| 4th month | father | .669* | .017 | .623* | .030 |
| | mother | .656* | .020 | .740** | .006 |
| 9th month | father | .740** | .006 | .804** | .002 |
| | mother | .725** | .008 | .923** | .001 |
| 48th month | father | .768** | .004 | .873** | .001 |
| | mother | .615* | .033 | .748** | .005 |

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Discussion

This paper presents the preliminary results of the first longitudinal study focused on the development of family interactions assessed through the LTP paradigm, from pregnancy to the school age. Results refer to a longitudinal project started in 2006 with the recruitment of 96 Italian primiparous families during the 7th month of pregnancy. The entire research project considers the assessment of the quality of family interactions, the level of marital satisfaction and the extent of the father's involvement in caregiving across several stages: at the 4th, 9th, 18th, 36/48th month of child's life. A follow-up is made after ten years, corresponding to the school age of the families' first child. So far, the paper reports preliminary results based on

14 families.

The first aim of this study was to analyse the development of quality of family interactions in different stages, highlighted from pregnancy to the school age, through the administration of LTP procedure. Our previous studies showed an increasing of quality of family interactions as a function of time, and showed a developmental trend from pregnancy to pre-school age (Simonelli et al., 2016). At the school-age stage, the developmental trend is not confirmed, rather the quality of family interactions seems to become more stable. The stability model (Carneiro et al., 2006; Favez et al., 2006) - formerly rejected in light of our previous results - might represent a possible explanation of the consolidation of family interactions nearby the transition to adolescence.

As a secondary objective, this paper attempts to observe and highlight the development of the quality of family interactions during the post-natal period, from the 4th month of child's life to the school-age follow-up. Overall, the quality of family interactions remains stable during the school age, as found in the analysis including the prenatal stage. Nevertheless, observing singular trends of each variable considered by the LTP coding system, we found that the quality of Infant's involvement changes significantly over time. This observed trend shows that the extent to which the child's signals are clear and interpretable by the parents significantly improves from the 4th month of the child's life to the pre-school age, perfectly in line with the idea of the specialization of communicative skills due to the child's growth but also with the repeated experience of interactive exchanges. On the contrary, from pre-school to the school age the degree of infant's involvement decreases. We can suppose that at this stage of development, some traits of the communicative closure typical of the later adolescence start to emerge and, simultaneously, the parents' capacities to understand and feel in connection to their child could be threatened. In fact, early adolescence represents a crucial period of autonomy negotiations within the parent-child relationship: the lack of difficulties in this transition is surprising and sometimes even indicative of a dysfunctional development (Steinberg, 2001). During adolescence, the need of separation and emotional detachment from the parents emerges in parents-child interactions and especially during parents-child conflicts. This work is a preliminary attempt to enlarge the knowledge about patterns of family interactions during adolescence in normative contexts and in non-conflictual situations, because few studies have deepened this aspect (Parolin, Sudati, Simonelli, & Gatta, *in press*). Moreover, our findings underline the ability of the Lausanne Trilogue Play to observe both the family as a whole, and the different subsystems which constitute it. The consideration of the contribution of each

subsystem in addition to the impact of the whole family leads to important clinical implications in terms of the child/adolescent's well-being. Schleider and Weisz (2016) proposed a triadic model of intervention for youth internalizing problems on the assumption that social, affective and cognitive processes in youth are proved to be consequences of parent-level factors, dyad-level factors and family-level factors: family functioning, family stability and parental differential treatment are able to determine the child's developmental trajectories. Favez et al. (2012) investigated the relationship between the quality of family interactions and the child's developmental outcomes, in terms of internalizing and externalizing behaviours, showing that a higher quality of family interactions was predictive of less negative outcomes for the child at 5 years, but only in conditions of high stability of family alliances. The simultaneous application of a macro-analytic perspective (the level of the whole family) with a micro-analytic one (subsystems' level) might therefore put light on the potential relation between family functioning and child's development. In addition, involving the whole family system within the assessment and through the therapy in developmental age could improve the working alliance and consequently the efficacy of the intervention (Gatta et al., 2009). Studies on the development of family interactions in non-referred groups might support knowledge between family functioning and the child's symptomatic expression, improving consequently the child/adolescent take in charge (Gatta et al., 2017).

As a third step, we also attempt to examine the construct of dyadic adjustment perceived by each parent and its evolution from pregnancy to the school-age stage. Results showed that overall the fathers' perceptions of marital adjustment remained stable over time. The same stability was not detected among mothers: the degree of marital satisfaction perceived by mothers decreases continuously from pregnancy to the school age of the first child. This result is in line with our previous analyses (Simonelli et al., 2016) and with the evidences of a general decline in the quality of the couple's relationship due to the transition to parenthood (Belsky, Spanier, & Rovine, 1983; Favez et al., 2012). Numerous studies support this result showing that the decline of marital satisfaction is more evident and more reported by women (Frosch, Mangelsdorf & McHale, 2000; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000), maybe because of their greater need of support during the early post-partum period. Marital satisfaction perceived by mothers reaches the lowest level during the school age of the first child, compared both with the pregnancy stage and with the 4th month after birth, while it seems to remain more stable from the 4th month to the pre-school age stage. Overall, the fathers' marital satisfaction remains stable over time, however as

observed, its level at the school age stage is significantly lower with respect to the 4th month of child's life. These results suggest that early adolescence is a critical period within the family's life cycle. Adolescence is conceptualized by some authors as a sort of "re-birth" of the child, which represents a critical event for parents (Scabini & Iafrate, 2003) and which could question the couple's balance. Beyond these signals, we can argue that overall DAS scores remain coherent over time, for the fathers' scores, the mothers' scores and for their interaction, as Spearman's correlations highlight.

In conclusion, these preliminary findings suggest that the developmental trend of quality of family interactions reaches a stable pattern at 10 years of the child's life. This stability might represent the optimal secure base for the physiological growth changes of the child, as shown by the variable Infant's involvement. In fact, stability in family alliances was proved to have a central role on the child's later outcomes, even more than the quality of family interactions per se (Favez et al., 2012). This finding needs to be deepened with an extension of the sample and the addition of other variables about the child's outcomes and the father's involvement in our analyses. In addition, due to the small size of the sample, we decided to not research further into the relation between family interactions and marital adjustment. However, a previous study about the relation between the mother's marital satisfaction and the quality of triadic interactions (Korja et al., 2016) showed that the more mothers were satisfied, the higher was family coordination at 18 months. Therefore, there is a possibility for further research on potential associations between the quality of family interactions and the degree of dyadic adjustment.

Notes

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