

Twin parenting experience – reshaping the family web

Summary

Being a parent of twin siblings is a major challenge for parents and requires a family restructuring to adapt to a new family environment.

OBJECTIVE. To understand the experiences of parents of twins and meanings attributed to them.

METHODS: a qualitative study was conducted, having the symbolic interactionism as a theoretical referential and the interpretative interactionism as the methodological referential. Twenty-nine parents with children under 4 years participated in this study. A semi-structured interview was conducted for data collection.

RESULTS. The twins family responses to parenting challenges are conditioned by the management and articulation of their difficulties, their strengths and personal resources. There is a clear choice in being a family with children that privileges negotiation and involvement of the couple in caring for the family, or, at least, part of the family, meaning the children and playing the parenting role.

CONCLUSIONS. The family grows as a complex web, including its elements and interactions. The symbolic construction evidences the way the family adjusts to this environment of twin parenting. The health professionals should be able to anticipate the needs of families going through this process.

KEYWORDS: FAMILY; PARENTS; TWINS.

Introduction

The family is still the core of social organization and a unique birthplace to grow and to learn with and from each other. This interaction and development require the adaptation of the family to a particular context, which influences the family structure and dynamics¹.

During the life cycle, parenthood is the most significant life-changing event in which families are faced with enormous challenges. Families have to deal with the imperative need for personal and family adjustments and to a new mindset within the family core, taking care of a child and redesigning new identities incorporating being a “father” and being a “mother”^{2,3}. These are all multiple determinants changes⁴, and the unique characteristics of parents and child, the family functioning and the internal resources, all contribute to the transition to parenthood. The perception of difficulties of the parenting role, alongside with the ability to decide on the number of children has been reflecting on the decrease of the birth rate mainly within developed societies.

Twin parenting is commonly associated with emotions, expectations and

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more intense anxiety levels compared to the situation of a single child. The experiences are increasingly difficult and demanding, with higher levels of tiredness and lower perceived self-confidence and capacity to care for the children^{5,6}.

Difficulties are more intense during the children first months, with more stressful routines due to the necessity of balancing both parents and children’s needs. The routines are similar to both children involving continuous tasks. In addition to this demand, and as often referred by parents of twin children, the sleep quality patterns are also affected⁷.

Thus, and with the increased burden of caring for twin children, the family environment is likely to suffer from multiple daily life difficulties. Decreased marital satisfaction is often associated with an increase of conceived births and parents of twin children are more likely to split or divorce⁵.

Family support is essential in the

transition to parenthood. Help from the maternal grandmother is particularly highlighted during the first weeks after birth, in the management of complex tasks, with repercussions at various levels in the family dynamics, contributing to the maintenance of marital relations. As to the mothers' perceptions of their children, the mothers of twin children refer that their children are more difficult to handle compared to the mothers' perceptions of a conceived single child⁸.

Problem statement

Twin children parental experience is an important challenge for the family, not only for the duplicate role play but also because of societal demands and expectations. Modern societies are more likely to face this challenge because the predominance of nuclear families diminishes the effectiveness of family support. Studies on twin children have been more focused on genetics and in the relations between twins, and therefore the study on the family living experiences is an important factor for the well-being of all family members.

Research questions

Considering the specificities of families with twin children, our purpose is to understand how these families experience twin parenting. Taking into consideration the complexity and subjectivity of the experiences, we used the first starting question: How do families experience twin parenting?

Purpose of the study

The aim of this study was to understand the experience of families with twin children aged under 4 years. The purpose was to contribute to enhancing interventions targeted at families living the experience of twin parenting.

A qualitative study was conducted based on the interpretative paradigm favouring the understanding of human experience as a true living experience, subjective and perceived by the ones involved⁹. Participants were selected in the Family Health Units integrating a Group of Health Centers (ACES) in the north of Portugal which aim the promoting and surveillance of persons and families throughout their life cycle.

Research methods

This study used the Symbolic Interactionism as the theoretical referential, where the object is the subject's action, and depends on the meaning attributed to the object and to the dimension that this experience has for this subject¹⁰. It incorporates reflection on the analysis of the action and it is used in studies on the daily life of people and interactions, aiming to disclose and learn its meaning^{11,12}. The Symbolic Interactionism grounds its theory on three aspects: human beings act in relation to things based on the meaning that these things have to them; meanings emerge from the social interaction that the individual establishes with others; the attributed meanings develop and change through an interpretative process, specific to each person when dealing with things and situations in life¹⁰. Thus, the Denzin Interpretative Interactionism¹³ was used for data analysis. This analysis method is focused on people's experiences, how these experiences change people and which meanings are attributed to these experiences.

We first started with a simple reading of the conducted interviews, in order to get a general idea of the participants' experiences. A further detailed analysis was then performed focused on the identification of phrases and statements that addressed the phenomenon; we interpreted their meaning; we identified the potentially emerging themes and in what ways they could contribute to the phenomenon under study.

We proceeded with the interpretation of the obtained data by producing explanations and trying to capture aspects of the human experience with regard to the experience of families with twin children.

For data collection the inclusion criteria established were: men, women or both living the experience of twin parenting of children under the age of 4 years; living together as a couple; and users of the regional Group of Health Centres (ACES Ave III). To apprehend the phenomenon, the biographical narratives of the participants in the study were obtained through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in the home of the participants or in the health centre, according to the availability of participants. Interviews were conducted in a single moment, lasted an average of 60 minutes, and were later recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Ethical approval was granted by the Ethics Committee for Health of the Regional Health Administration of the North of Portugal and from the Institute of Biomedical Sciences Abel Salazar. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to sign an informed consent and were informed about the purpose of the interview and that confidentiality was assured.

Findings

Twenty-nine parents of twin children participated in this study.

In order to preserve the confidentiality of testimonies, we will gather and present the characteristics of every family. Regarding the age of the participants, women showed an average age of 34.6 years with a minimum of 22 years and maximum of 40 years. The average age of men was 36.3 years ranging between a minimum of 21 years and a maximum of 52. Eight of the women participating in this study had higher education, three had completed high school and the remaining the basic education level. Three of the male participants had higher education, two

completed high school and the remaining had basic education.

All participants were married, one of the families was restructured but their twin children were from the current marriage. The average number of years of marriage was 7.31, ranging from a minimum of 3 years and a maximum of 18 years.

In what refers to the number of children, two families had four children at the time of data collection, and one of the families had two pairs of twins, three families had three children with the twin children being the youngest, and the remaining families had two twin children.

Finally, we considered the family composition of participants in the study: six family units were extended families, integrating the parents of one of the spouses and other family members.

From data analysis, two themes and sub-themes emerged that represent the symbolic construction of the participants with regard to how their families have experienced twin parenting.

The quotes extracted from the interviews are identified with "I" for interview followed by the number assigned to the family and "W" or "M" describing woman or man. Names used in the speeches are fictional.

Reshaping the family web to the birth of twin children implies making more or less conscious choices, to make decisions, to adopt strategies and mobilize resources to respond to perceived needs. The themes identified in the participants' discourse analysis helps us to understand how this adjustment process occurs. In this sense, the themes identified were to strengthen the family web, through the adoption of family routines, flexibility, preservation of routines and mobilization and management of aid and enhance parts of the family structure affected by fragilities, conditioned by beliefs, centered on the children's routines and consolidated in family bonds.

Thus, when the focus is on the family, there is a strengthening of the family web through the adoption of family routines that have to be adjusted to the life cycle of the family, age and health conditions. The family environment experiences changes and mobilizations, timetables are changed, the physical structure and the organization of the house. The routines work as a protective factor, promoter of personal and family development. If the pace and family routines prior to the birth of the children were not so well adjusted and individual independence and autonomy had significant impact in the life of the family, this change and adaptation to a new organization are increasingly complex. The participants recognized that an effort was made in order to adapt to the new family organization.

I've never had routines and so it was difficult, because with them we need to schedule things. Often we would eat midnight (I9M).

... but these are important to them, the routines, you had to manage the more grown up, their plays, play with them, dinner, also get to feed the babies, sometimes we had dinner at 10 in the evening, it was hard at first to manage the routine. They are four, it's the adaptation, but time went by (I7W).

However, the routines must be based on flexibility. The organization and distribution of family tasks should be consensual according to each other's availability. This flexibility is reflected in the actual organization of the family life and domestic life and should be adapted to the family needs.

... but tasks are not defined, we know what we have to do and we do it as far as we can [...] one thing I've learned is that there's no use in making plans. When I thought I was going to do this and that they wouldn't let me, and I felt frustrated, irritated [...]. I think that most importantly a person has to be practical (I11W).

... if they want to play, they'll play, the house is chaos when they're awake, toys all over the place, everything scratched, at night when they go to sleep we arrange everything, it has to be this way, it's their time, they must enjoy it, and if not we wouldn't rest anyway (I10W).

In view of the challenges of twin parenting, family strengths are emphasized promoting the family involvement and sharing in a common project. Family strengths favour the interaction between its members. The mutual support enhances the ability of the family to deal with adversity and in relation to twin children, this specific need is even more evidenced.

... in case of twin children, the couple helps each other even more than when there is only one child. It's better. Twins involve more people, more help, no one can take of two children on their one (I13W).

I think if it was different (husband involvement) [...]. I was almost having a [...] we were both almost having a breakdown, but if things were different, I would surely collapse.

To cope with the work overload caused by the birth of twin children, the family, in addition to the aforementioned strategies, also seeks to mobilize available help. The family identifies the resources that may be useful to address stress situations and imbalances within the family dynamics. The grandparents are the main resource, their help is determined by the couple, considering what they think better suits the circumstances.

... my mother-in-law helps me in the evening (I4W).

... my mother helps me a lot, for instance, if I need her to pick the children at the kindergarten or if I stay at work and need her to stay with them, but this is it, she picks the girls and he (husband) meets her there, then she helps him bring them

home and then she leaves (I10W).

... our mother-in-law helps us whenever needed (I10M).

When the family is focused on the parental project there is a strengthening of parts of the family web, that is, the trajectory shifts from the sense of being a couple to being a mother/father with a family. In this particular situation the established family dynamics in the initial period of the adaptation to the birth of twin children perpetuates in time and children are the reason and the center of everything and everyone.

... everything is about them. Everything, just everything, the family here at home and my husband's family (I12W).

My parents-in-law are living here with us and this has interfered a lot, I've always valued privacy (I2M).

Because parenting is complex, the family responses towards changes and challenges are not always adequate to meet their own needs. Some weaknesses are exposed either at the level of relations with others or in what concerns sharing of responsibility on the parental role. The woman is the primary responsible for childcare.

... it's obvious that I think more than he does, I get much more tired, I work harder because I really have to be there for them (I8W).

... at home I'm the one making more decisions, I feel upset because I'm the one who has to decide on things. It's usually my responsibility [...] he said: you're the mother (I2W).

... being a mother is a big responsibility. Some time ago I considered the hypothesis of getting a job but he said if you're going to work then who is going to take care of the children (I5W).

Beliefs are identified relating to family role plays affecting the sharing and involvement of all in the family life and care. Women find that some care should be their sole responsibility because they are the mothers. Personal characteristics add to these conceptions that influence the way personal and family responses evolve in relation to challenges.

I think the mother should be the one doing certain things (I12W).

... the mother does more things than the father. It's natural, I also work a lot of time outside the house, even so, it's natural that the mother does more things than I do (I2M).

The family routines change according to the children's routines and although these routines are considered an important part in the management of the children and family's needs, they are mainly focused on the children's needs. The family is forced to set priorities and making decisions and it is during this process that responses are constructed and oriented towards the children's needs and routines. These routines demand energy and effort from parents and are likely to become a barrier to the establishment of family routines that are no longer a priority and prevent the family from re-establishing former routines.

... it's different now, our routines, our schedules are set according to our children (I4M).

... we don't re-establish our family routines, it's a big effort (I8W).

... everything changed [...] all house routines have changed (I2W).

... we still don't have routines (I16W).

The establishment of alliances evidencing the proximity of two family members, where a third element is separated or in opposite situation, occurs in the presence of difficulties in the articulation and involvement of all family, thus leading to the proximity to a certain family member. If this proximity occurs in relation to the mother's wife, then time is spent close to the origin family. The maternal reference is the one providing more safety and support. Occasionally, the woman may feel safer with her own parents than with her spouse, establishing an alliance with the origin family involving the children.

I spend my life with my mother, I only go home to sleep (I5W).

I'd rather be with my parents than with him (husband), I feel more supported [...] they even sleep over here (I2W).

... when my mother stayed at my house it was easier, if it was my husband it was a little harder (I8W).

The husband might additionally feel that his performance as to the parental role distances from initial expectations, he perceives that the presence of the grandparents in the children's life is more important than his. Men recognize the benefits of this relationship, although it is still not the most desired.

... my mother-in-law is 100% available, but we are the parents [...] it was

never my decision, they sleep over there, it's better and they really help my wife but I don't feel good about that. My parents-in-law spend more time with my daughters than I do... they know I'm their father, sometimes I feel put aside but I know it's not their (parents-in-law) intention (I2M).

According to their needs and resources, families are more oriented to care and to the children's needs concentrating their efforts towards them.

According to figure 1, reshaping the family web is a process balancing between family focus and children's focus. In fact, it seems relevant that the family is able to preserve routines, to mobilize help, to understand personal strengths and evidence the adaptation abilities. However, this path involves some difficult choices.

On the other hand, there is a reshape of the family web centered on the children and the parental role. In this process, the family needs are now focused on their children as the sole priority. The woman establishes alliances with the family of origin and focuses on the children's routines.

This adjustment in either direction is continuously been established and its trajectory depends on the family and the specific moment in life.

Throughout this process of reshaping the family web, mothers spend so much time taking care of their children that their time seems to be completely dedicated to that role. Others recognize the women response to such demanding responsibilities.

... during the first six months I had no life of my own, without any doubt. Everything was about both of them (I1W).

... during the day I am fully dedicated to them there's no use in doing differently, because it's really just for them, if you try to escape they'll instantly call for us (I10W).

... the family still asks: how are things going? My god, how do you manage all that? (I3W).

... many of my colleagues say: I think many times how are things going for you! Because they have just one and sometimes... poor of them (I7W).

However and despite the difficulties and concerns, the experience of having twin children is perceived as a very positive experience.

... being a father of twins is something extraordinary (I6M);

I'm very happy I never thought that being a mother was like this, but there are also negative aspects, many, my life has really changed a lot... it's a new experience but very exhausting (I15W);

The best moments... just everyday (I14W);

I think the best of everything is being a mother (I4W);

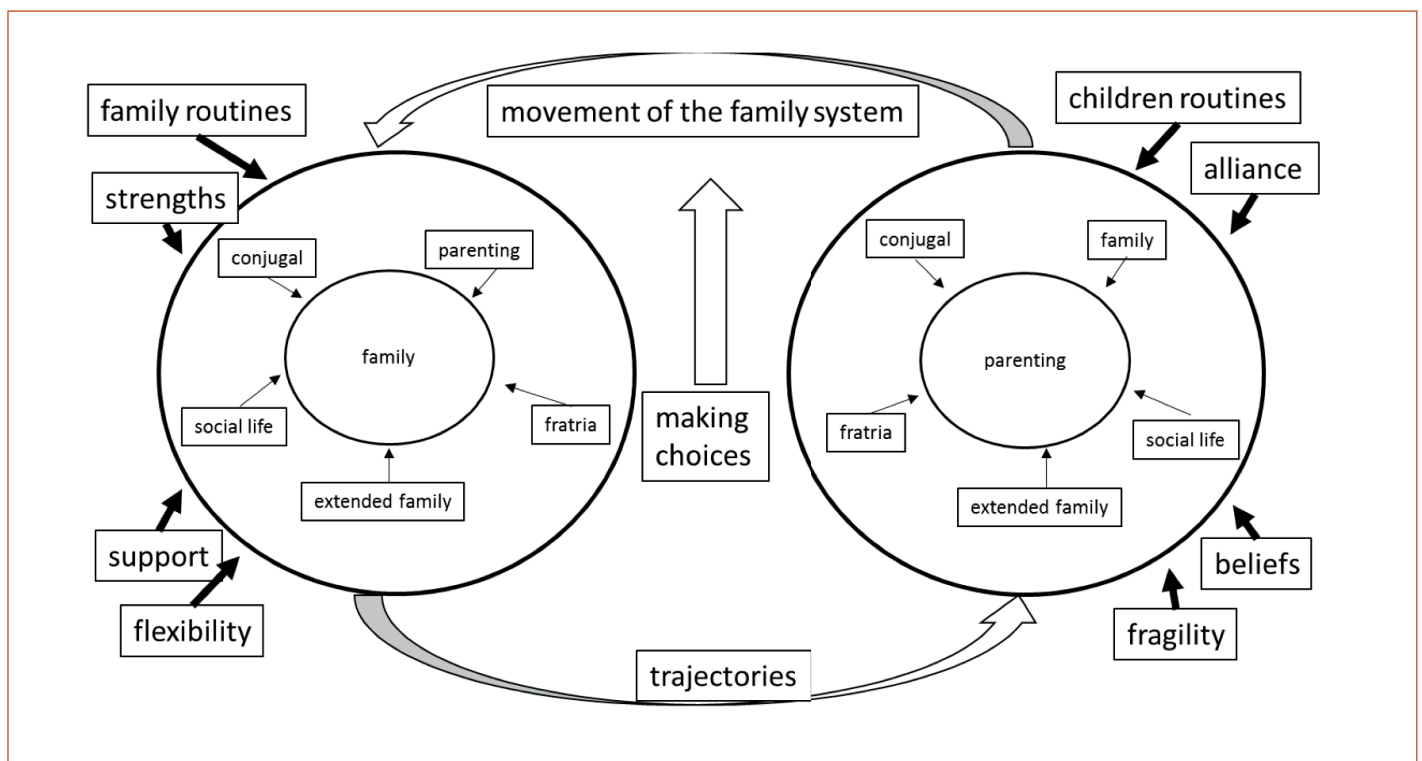


Figure 1. Adjusting the web

To hug them, it's the best thing. Watch them laughing at us, It's just wonderful (I13W).

There is evidence of the importance of families being able to preserve family routines, to mobilize help, recognize their strengths and show the ability to adapt. This is a path that often implies difficult choices.

Discussion

The family continues developing and reconstructing over time setting milestones and joint projects. During this path the personal and/or family transitions are a challenge that imposes the incorporation of new demands, the adequacy and interpretation of new roles and integrating a new identity¹.

The birth of twin children is one of the family's life changing experiences and an event that inevitably changes the entire dynamics of the family processes. This experience is similar to other families with children, however, it is the intensity of this experience that will dictate the impact in families' lives.

The literature emphasizes the constraints of the experience of twin parenting, suggesting that having twin children is more difficult than expected. Mothers of twins often report the higher impact of the difficulties experienced when compared to mothers of a single conceived child^{14,15}.

The transcribed testimonies in this study show that women recognize that they feel some insecurity and have questions about the parental role and that they experienced constant fatigue, especially in the child early months. But these women also report that watching their children grow and the opportunity to interact with them is a unique experience and one of best things in life. Positive experiences were emphasized in their statements, alongside with the difficulties experienced during this process. The experience is influenced by its intensity either in difficult times or in joyful moments.

In family life, the communication, the commitment, the social relationships, the clear roles and shared time are essential aspects, and in this study the positive aspects more referred were: the family bonds and family support, the strong bond between parents and children and the ability to organize and share tasks of daily living which corroborates with other authors' findings. Considering that the involvement of everyone in the family life promotes family strengthening and improves the ability to confront situations, one of the attitudes that favours this interaction is the fact that the woman encourages the man to participate in family care, avoiding isolation and promoting the family's well-being¹⁶.

In fact, it is during the first months of the children's lives that the life of families suffers major changes. This is a crucial period for the new parents. The physical and emotional involvement of the woman is increasingly higher in case of twin children. The lack of time and the ability to respond to both often matching needs are frequently reported by parents and likely to trigger stress episodes^{6,17}.

Usually, the father acts as a support¹⁸, however, in relation to twin children, his involvement either complements the role of the woman or is replaced by another significant family member, leading to feelings of family and social exclusion. The woman acknowledges that having a partnership with the man is a promoter of an effective parental role and leads to a stronger involvement in the family life. The family strengths are enhanced and the family of origin works as a resource. In addition to the mobilization of resources it is also important to consider a greater sharing and flexibility of the couple, alongside with an effective family communication leading to stronger bonds and helping in the acceptance of the new parental roles¹⁷.

It should be noted that the family environment has suffered changes and mobilizations, schedules have been changed, the house physical structure and the functional organization, which corroborates with the study conducted by Alves et al.¹⁹ and, although these routines require an additional effort, they were considered beneficial for the functionality of the family, since they created stability and predictability. The routines work as a protective factor, promoting personal and family development²⁰.

Because parenting is complex, multi-determinant and influenced by parental personality, values, marital quality and social factors, among others, the family responses when dealing with changes and challenges not always adequately meet their specific needs. Some weaknesses are revealed, either in the relations established with others or when sharing responsibility in the parental role, because the woman is still the main responsible for the care provided to the child and for the daily tasks, as stated by Jager & Bottoli¹⁶. In these situations the family routines submit to the children's routines and although these routines are considered important in managing the children's and family's needs, they are still mainly focused on the children's needs.

With the children's birth and their needs, the challenge can be so intense for the woman that, in addition to preventing couples of having a time for sharing, which was already recognized by some of the participants, this can often be considered a loss. Women often feel extremely responsible for the inability to respond appropriately to the husband and the daily tasks²¹. The husband withdrawal of this family caring does not have a sole responsible, since the family system itself leads to this exclusion¹⁶.

The difficulty in managing the time to care for the children affects the time dedicated to the family and in particular, for the spouse

and promotes social isolation. The woman feels this excessive burden and isolation for being confined to the house increasing her vulnerability.

The relationships and family of origin resources are of great importance in families with children. The grandparents' support is crucial for the woman, but it is the maternal grandmother which most often provides this assistance, a finding also found in the study developed by Taubman-Ben-Ari et al.²² where this support provided is what brings added value in situations of the woman's increased vulnerability. When there is a continuous support of the origin family, whether in their own house, or moving in a more or less permanent way to the couple's house, there are difficulties in establishing the boundaries between the new family and the family of origin. Finally, the qualitative study conducted, in accordance with the study performed by Ellison & Hall²³ evidenced an increased demand when the children are twins and the family relationship can potentially be strengthened, if the man is more committed to the family, enabling a stronger teamwork as a couple.

Conclusion

From the analysis of this study it is possible to conclude that twin parenting requires clear and decisive choices towards a more united and cohesive family in relation to family care or, in opposite, a family focused only on one of its nuclear elements, and potentially excluding the man and letting another element take his place, usually someone from the family of origin. This last hypothesis is clearly the one more difficult to deal with.

There is also evidence that the first children's months are particularly difficult and the support of the extended family, in particular of grandmothers is highly significant but not always free from conflicts. According to participants, the maternal grandmother and father are the preferred family elements to help take care of the children. The fatigue is experienced by men and women but both agree that in case of a single child, the parental role of the men would be less stressful.

After this initial phase of greater support and involvement of all there are families who get involved in a joint project, in which the resources mobilization and social support is well defined and delimited. If on the one hand, one is looking to meet all needs equally and according to the response capacity, on the other hand, there are families unable to distance from social support and the woman's involvement is oriented to the exterior, mainly towards the grandmother. These are not decisive positioning and it is not common to find a family that fits into a single profile, it changes according to the family's life and the experienced phases.

The family strengthening in response to the twin parenting demands should be a focus of attention to nursing professionals. The support to families in the process of recognising and exploiting their own resources is seen as important, as well as the search for new resources with the help of professionals.

It is also important the identification of family needs and personal, family and social resources, and their mobilization. This intervention should focus on communication processes and anticipatory care.

We understand that these interventions should take place in different moments and be targeted at the needs of each family, considering the following objectives: to discuss the involvement of the couple in the family role; raise awareness for a new family organization; reinforce the identification of strengths and family resources; to monitor the responses of the family to the specific tasks of family development; to monitor family relationships, to encourage free communication between family members; to collaborate with the family in problem solving and adjust expectations.

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