

## Psicologia: Teoria e Pesquisa



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### REFERÊNCIA

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## He was neither a good father nor a good husband: Marital and parental roles in low-income separated families<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT** - This study aims to differentiate parental and marital roles of low-income separated parents with small children. This survey was conducted in a university school clinic of Psychology, based on qualitative methodology. Four mothers and three fathers participated in semi-structured individual interviews. Through thematic analysis, the outcomes showed the dynamic, paradoxical, and recursive reality of these families, with particularities and similarities to other socioeconomic contexts. Movements to maintain and to end the marital roles and inclusion of third parties in the marital conflict contribute to confusion between parental and marital roles. Attempts to differentiate these roles were also observed, offering strengths that should be emphasized.

**Keywords:** separation; low-income population; family conflict; parenting

## Não foi bom pai, nem bom marido: Conjugalidade e parentalidade em famílias separadas de baixa renda

**RESUMO** - O objetivo deste estudo foi conhecer a diferença entre parentalidade e conjugalidade de pais e mães em situação de separação conjugal, de baixa renda e com filhos pequenos. Esta pesquisa foi realizada em uma clínica-escola universitária de Psicologia, a partir da metodologia qualitativa. Quatro mães e três pais participaram de entrevistas individuais semiestruturadas. Por meio de análise temática, os resultados evidenciaram a realidade dinâmica, paradoxal e recursiva dessas famílias, apresentando aspectos particulares e semelhantes a outros contextos socioeconômicos. Movimentos de manutenção e encerramento da conjugalidade e inclusão de terceiros no conflito conjugal contribuem para confusão entre os papéis parentais e conjugais. Tentativas de diferenciação entre esses papéis também foram observadas, oferecendo recursos que devem ser enfatizados.

**Palavras-chave:** separação, população de baixa renda, conflito conjugal, parentalidade

### Introduction

One of the major challenges posed to separated families with children is to distinguish marital from parental roles. This differentiation process is directly related to the concept of family boundaries, which establish limits that cannot be crossed and other conditions that can be more flexible. Typically, at moments of family transition, it is common to have unclear and diffused frontiers for the system to be reorganized. As time goes by these limits must become clear to the members (Emery, 2012; Minuchin, Colapinto, & Minuchin, 2011; Schudlich *et al.*, 2015; Silva & Lopes, 2012).

Marital role arises from the relationship of two adults united by emotional and sexual ties to satisfy their psychological needs and mutually support one another, thus building the marital subsystem. Parental roles, in turn, emerge from the inclusion of a child in the family system, demanding the couple to develop new tasks aimed at the protection, financial support, and education of their children. These tasks make up the parental subsystem. Both roles are full of beliefs, values and behaviors built upon the experiences with their families of origin and other community and social ties. In this way,

marital and parental roles are tangled in the family development process, demanding clear boundaries to attach privilege to the children's needs and avoid making them part of the marital conflicts and tensions (Minuchin *et al.*, 2011; Silva & Lopes, 2012; Ziviani, Féres-Carneiro & Magalhães, 2012).

Marital roles can be dissolved upon the adults' decision to divorce or separate. On the other hand, parental roles are indissoluble since ties between parents, children and siblings must remain, regardless of the family configuration (Ziviani *et al.*, 2012). Feelings of anger, sorrow and sadness resulting from the marital separation process may hinder even more this differentiation process, crucial to the emotional health of the family, mainly of the children (Juras & Costa, 2011).

In moments of divorce and separation the parental couple should renegotiate and redefine these boundaries. Firstly, each adult should rebuild their individual boundaries, elaborating grievance and the new individuality before setting clear frontiers with the ex-spouse. This new relationship between the ex-couple should be characterized by less emotional commitment - which is typical of the marital role - and for maintaining parental involvement. With clearer boundaries, the parental roles are reestablished while marital roles tend to disappear (Emery, 2012; Grzybowski & Wagner, 2010).

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Distinguishing these roles is particularly important for families with young children, considering that this stage of development still demands lots of care and, therefore, greater interdependence between parents and children. Moreover, although children perceive the conflict between parents, they have not yet developed emotional and cognitive strategies to stay away from the parental couple's fights. In situations of conflictive separations, children usually are involved in triangulations, included in intergeneration conflicts, and take on roles incompatible with their level of development. This generates overload, distress and suffering (Juras & Costa, 2011; McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012).

Studies about divorce and separation are ever more frequent. Most of the national and international studies with separated or divorced individuals and families, however, do not emphasize economic issues, mainly focusing on upper-middle class individuals. According to Perez and Bairon (2013), almost 78% of the Brazilian population belongs to the low-income class, representing classes C, D and E. These families earn less than three times the minimum wage per month. Therefore, one must understand the peculiarities of the low-income families' separation process, highlighting their specificities, difficulties, resources, and competences (Amato, 2010).

The viewpoint of this paper regarding separated low-income families emphasizes their skills, resources, and potential. That is so because separation and divorce cause changes and may enable a more suitable family reorganization to members (Juras & Costa, 2011). These changes include putting an end to marital links and continuing parenthood. These family roles should be clearly defined. In this sense, this article aimed to investigate the process of differentiating marital

and parental roles in situations of separation involving low-income fathers and mothers, with young children.

## Method

Due to its complex nature, the separation and divorce phenomena demand using a research methodology that comprises their pluridimensional traits. Therefore, this survey was based on qualitative epistemology focused on prioritizing the characterization, understanding, and interpretation of the phenomenon in study (Minayo, 2008). This paper is the initial part of a broader survey that proposed a group psychosocial intervention with separated fathers and mothers with young children.

## Participants

The inclusion criteria established in the research project to select participants were as follows: men and women who lived in cohabitation or marriage with child (or children) still in childhood (up to 12 years old incomplete) born from that relationship; being separated from the spouse from four to eighteen months; personal income of one to three minimum wages/month; and who agreed with the Free and Informed Consent Term by signing it. Seven individuals living in situation of marital separation participated in this research. Of these, four were mothers and three were fathers. Participants' names are fictitious and information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 *Information about participants*

Name and age	Length of union (U), separation (S) and/or divorce (D)	Age of children and with whom they live	Occupation	Individual income*	Education
<b>Antônia</b> (47 years old)	U: 12 years S: 18 months	Alice, 10 years old (mother); Other two of 23 and 27 years old, from a previous relationship	Dishwasher	1.9 MW	Complete fundamental school***
<b>Bruno</b> (35 years old)	U: 4 years S: 1 year	Benito, 3 years old (maternal grandmother)	Salesman	2 MW	Complete higher education
<b>Cláudio</b> (37 years old)	U: 5 years S: 1 year	Carlos, 5 years old (mother)	Process analyst	1.3 MW	Incomplete higher education
<b>Dalva</b> (32 anos)	U: 10 years S: 1 year	A son and a daughter of 9 and 10 years old (mother)	Maid	2.2 MW	Incomplete fundamental school
<b>Elza</b> (20 years old)	U: 2 years S: 7 months	Eduarda, 2 years old (mother and grandparents)	Preschool Assistant	1.6 MW	Incomplete higher education
<b>Fátima</b> (28 years old)	U: 7 years S: 2 years D: 2 months	Fábio, 9 years old (father); daughters from other relationships, 1 and 13 years old	General services clerk	1.5 MW	Incomplete secondary education
<b>Gerson</b> (49 years old)	U: 14 years S: 8 years**	Daughters of 10 and 11 years old (mother)	Electrician	Not stated	Complete fundamental school

\*Values in minimum wages. According to Decree 8166 of 12/23/2013 the Brazilian minimum wage in 2014 was R\$ 724.00 in worth.

\*\* In the recruitment stage, the research team understood that Gerson had been separated for eight months; however, by the end of the interview, he said that separation was eight years before. Because of the relevance of his interview, notably due to the higher social vulnerability, his data were maintained.

\*\*\* Fundamental school in Brazil represents the school period from 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

## Instrument

Participants attended individual semi-structured interviews. The interview is a talk between two or more persons, implying the consistent participation between interviewer and respondent. The semi-structured modality allows directing it towards the research objectives. In addition, it provides some freedom of responses, according to the variety of contents that may be built during the empirical process. The individual format intended to deepen the understanding of the family background related to the marital separation of each participant, oriented by a semi-structured script (Minayo, 2008). Interviews were guided by a script with questions that explored aspects on marital roles, parental roles, history of the union, birth of children, and separation and the relationship with the family of origin.

## Procedures

When the Committee of Ethics in Research of the Human Sciences Institute of the University of Brasilia (UnB; Consolidated Report 527.255 of 02/11/2014) approved the research project, it was publicized to services working with separated and divorced families in the Federal District to increase the possibility of recruiting participants. The main sources of referral to this survey were the Defensoria Pública of the Federal District and the Serviço de Assessoramento às Varas Cíveis e de Família (Seraf) of the Court of Justice of the Federal District and Territories (TJDFT). After referrals, the research team made phone contact to select and invite participants to the survey. According to the inclusion criteria, 24 individuals were selected and agreed on participating in the survey. However, only seven attended the person-to-person interview held in a university teaching clinic of Psychology.

## Recording and analysis of results

Individual interviews were recorded in audio and further integrally transcribed. The constructed results were analyzed following the thematic analysis methodology (Minayo, 2008). According to the author “the notion of *theme* is linked to a statement about a given matter. It comprises a range of relations and may be graphically represented by a word, a phrase, an abstract” (p. 315). The thematic analysis has three stages: pre-analysis; exploitation of material; and, handling and interpretation of results achieved. In the first stage, the team performed the initial exploratory reading of records and transcriptions of the entire material of individual interviews. Further, they sought key words, phrases or context units that represented the communications presented. The most significant responses were selected, and the topics and contents referring to these excerpts were described. The topics and contents of each individual interview were pooled, organized, and printed as posters. Finally, the third stage was performed by handling and interpreting results, highlighting the most relevant topics to respond the research objective. These made up the thematic nuclei.

## Results and discussion

Because of the nature of the methodology used in this survey, where results are constructed from the researcher’s interpretation in the light of scientific literature, results and discussion will be jointly presented. The analysis of results gave rise to three thematic nuclei: 1) marital bonds still present; 2) triangulations with children, family members, and justice; and, 3) confusions and differentiations between marital and parental roles.

### Thematic nucleus 1) Marital bonds still present: “*We separated, but are still together!*”

The young couple is the first stage of the family life cycle (McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012). Most of the participants reported brief marital involvement, starting to live together few months after the first meeting. The accelerated process of marital union in these families was mainly related to the need for housing, financial aspects, and birth of a child, as shown in the following quotations:

Gerson: *It didn't take more than two months for us to start living together. Then, I went to live with her.*

Bruno: *I used to live with my parents and she lived with a friend. They fought and she asked to spend some time at my home, until she could get another place. So I let her, and she stayed, stayed...*

The family life cycle is a conceptual model first proposed and studied with North-American middle-class individuals. However, it should be contextualized according to each familiar, cultural, and social reality. Little attention is paid to families in situation of poverty and social vulnerability and their particularities, such as context of misery, discrimination, unemployment, early death, abuse of substances, and criminal involvements influenced by several social and institutional exclusions. The structural difficulties of this context can contribute to unstable or shortened family cycles. This increases the chances of conflicts, violence and separations that, in turn, increase social vulnerabilities (Greene, Anderson, Forgatch, DeGarmo & Hetherington, 2012; McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012).

The shortened and accelerated life cycle of these families also plays a role in the greater instability of the marital relation. This was observed in the statements of some participants, like Claudio’s: “*I left home three or more times. Went and returned, went and returned*”. Such a marital come and go has impacts even after the decision for separating. This keeps alive aspects related to marital bonds built over years, through adaptive standards and repetitions. In transition periods, like a separation, families are expected to activate previously established standards to resist to the changed required with ambivalent movements of maintaining and terminating the marital links (McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012).

Another factor related to the maintenance of marital bonds after separation is the presence of deep feelings directed to the ex-spouse. Many participants showed affection still linked to marital life, such as missing, sorrow, sadness, and anger feelings:

Dalva: *I lost a person [ex-partner], but [pause and cry]... Sorry. I still have my kids, right?*

Antonia: *If he dies, it doesn't matter to me, it is nice that I will set off fireworks. I want... Not even a chicken, I have chicken there, I can't kill. And he, I wanted to kill him.*

Most of the participants expressed coping moments of deep sadness after separation. Marital dissolution can lead parents to develop depressive states. This state tends to reduce the parents' capacity of properly distinguishing family boundaries, increasing conflicts and their children's neglect (Schudlich *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, the many challenges posed to low-income families may be exacerbated in moments of crisis and family transition such as the marital separation.

The moment of the participants' marital dissolution should also be contextualized: most were separated for seven months to one year, which demonstrates they are still in a stage of transition from married family to separated family. During this period, the legal, emotional, financial, social, and parental issues required to reach a new family homeostasis are discussed and negotiated. In this stage of family grievance these feelings normally exist, tending to disappear about two years after separation (Greene *et al.*, 2012; McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012). Understanding the intensity of this emotional process and the difficulties faced by low-income families is crucial before asking parents to prioritize the children's well-being to the detriment of their feelings towards the ex-spouse. Likewise, it is important to consider that the difficulties that arise in this process of family transition are not necessarily pathologic or permanent. In fact, these represent the family's attempts to explore new possibilities and fit into the new situation (Emery, 2012; Minuchin *et al.*, 2011).

In addition to the length of separation, these feelings may be intensified by memories of situations of violence during the relationship, and the permanence of marital conflicts after separation. Experiencing violence during marital union was strongly present in the respondents' speeches. All participants, except for Fatima, reported it:

Antonia: *And he kicked the food I bought... (...) Suddenly he started cursing, humiliate me and, sometimes, I stood there quiet, fearing some fight.*

Bruno: *And more and more, terrible fights, you see? With knives.*

Gerson: *My aggressions, very few, maybe more moral ones.*

Domestic violence is the reflex of the patriarchal culture that stiffens gender roles and builds power inequalities between men and women. The participants' speeches showed many rigid gender beliefs and values. These not only placed women as caregivers and men as providers, but also revealed strength and power inequalities. Although the respondent women showed attitudes of strength and resilience in face of difficulties, they were victims of a wide range of violence. According to Greene *et al.* (2012), situations of violence are more common against women after separation, mainly when she was the one to decide for terminating the marriage.

In brief, the shortening of family life cycle, the instability of the marital subsystem, the presence of deep feelings after separation, and marital violence are factors that contribute to preserve the paradox movements of maintenance and termination of marital bonds. While violence and conflicts boosted the marital separation, memories and feelings linked

to this experience bring emotional and affective taints that contribute to keeping marital bonds. Although marital links are theoretically terminated after separation, in practice they remain present, even if in a different form (Grzybowski & Wagner, 2010; Juras & Costa, 2011).

### **Thematic Nucleus 2) Triangulations: "Other persons will help me to separate!"**

The paradox movements analyzed in the first thematic nucleus increase tension and anxiety in the marital subsystem. This, in turn, contributes to the building of several triangulations. According to Bowen (1991) a dual relation is weak to cease tensions and anxieties, demanding the involvement of a third party to relief and stabilize the relation, thus building a triangle. These third parties are dialectically and paradoxically included and sometimes offer support, and other times contribute to intensify conflicts. These triangular alliances are usually transitory and can be beneficial to the system. Losses come about when these alliances build coalitions of rigid opposition thus increasing tension, including new third parties, and creating strict loyalties and triangular conflicts (Bowen, 1991; Minuchin *et al.*, 2011). The most common triangles in marital relationships involve children, original family members, lovers, friends and members of the community social network (Klever, 2008). The participants' speeches revealed several triangulations arising during the union and after marital separation.

Children were the main targets of triangulation included in marital relationship. Cerveny (2006) uses the metaphors "glue", "suitcase" and "bullet" to point out the main triangulations of children when parents get separated. Children can participate to keep the parental couple "glued", representing the shared desire of keeping the idealized family together. Parents can also use children as "suitcases" to send and receive messages between the parental couple, and even as "bullets" to hurt the other parent. Following are some examples of these triangulations:

Fatima: *We were almost separated, but we said: "No, the boy is young, let's take more time". ("Glue" function).*

Antonia: *She [daughter] didn't visit them [the father and paternal grandmother] for two months because they asked a lot about my life, so she stopped visiting them. ("Suitcase" function)*

Dalva: *Sometimes I cursed, said "oh, your father isn't good, he doesn't do it, doesn't do that". ("Bullet" function).*

Previous studies have also observed these functions, which proved to be sources of suffering to children, mainly the young ones (younger than 12 years), because they have not yet developed skills to handle such conflicts and loyalties. The triangulation of children, keeping them in functions that extrapolate their responsibilities, damages their development. Single children are even more vulnerable in this process, because they have no peer to share tensions and sufferings with (Greene *et al.*, 2012; Grzybowski & Wagner, 2010; Juras & Costa, 2011). This case is true for most of the participants' children. Some participants could perceive their children's suffering in this triangulation process:

Bruno: *I can see my son suffering, he sees one here, the other there, we fighting.*

Claudio: *After separation he [the son] felt it a lot at school. He doesn't want to study anymore, and so on. (...) He didn't eat, had problems and the stomach was hampered, he had to go to the physician, take medicine...*

In addition to the physical and emotional suffering, one of the main consequences related to children's triangulations after marital separation refers to the parentification process. According to Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) this process is related to the behavioral or fanciful behavior of a parent or a child in parental role, i.e., of giving care to the other. Teaching a child to develop care skills is important to their maturing process. However, this should be eventual and according to the child's developmental capacity. When the parentification of a child is frequent and rigid, it can overload and damage the child's growth (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark; 1973; Juras & Costa, 2011). Most of the participants reported aspects related to their children's parentification:

Antonia: *Alice then used to come, take me and put in bed. I pretended to be sleeping and returned. When my depression was too strong, Alice used to take me to the bathroom to take a shower... She sleeps with me.*

Claudio: *But he cried and said to me, my own son said directly to me: "Look, dad, the best for you and mom is if you stay here, at my grandma's house, stay living here, we'll meet again. If you come back home and fight again with mom, I won't understand you anymore".*

These speeches show over-maturity of children concerned about their parents, behaving in a way incompatible with their degree of development. The early care and decision-making, typical to parentification processes, seem to be more frequent in hardship due to poverty and social vulnerability, where since early ages children know life realities and shortages. Paradoxically this organization is harmful to the family members but, at the same time, it assures the need for family survival in the short time (Juras & Costa, 2011; Penso & Sudbrack, 2004).

Another frequent triangulation reported by participants is the active participation of grandparents regarding the support to their children and grandchildren, as happens in marital conflicts. This triangulation appeared both during the marital union and after separation. During union, the speeches of some participants referred to the interference of their parents on the marital decisions, as Gerson put it: *"My mother wanted to separate she and I".* According to McGoldrick and Shibusawa (2012) young adults from the most disadvantaged socioeconomic layers and that underwent shortened - or incomplete - family life cycles are more prone to remain dependent of their families, emotionally and materially, including them in triangulations with their spouses and children. This constructing of dependent marital identity restricts the development of marital and parental roles required by the starting of a new family.

The participants' reports showed that sons, daughters and in-laws use to ask grandparents to take care of the children, temporarily during visits, or even sending the children to live with them after separation. Grandparents may have an important role to families after separation or divorce, providing two main kinds of support: emotional (such as affection, company, advice, transmitting values) and instrumental (like staying at home with the child, financial aid, food supply). The inten-

sity of such support depends on the location, custody, age, marital status and employment of grandparents (Schuler & Dias, 2015). The cases analyzed herein point out that most participants returned to their parents' home after separation, or live in houses provided by them. The expanded family network is frequent among low-income families to provide greater economic support and protection to its members (McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012).

The higher degree of inter-relation between generations, in turn, can also bring problems and conflicts considering that negotiations and decision-making include more adults. Such a paradox participation of grandparents, sometimes supporting other times worsening conflicts, makes the parental authority fluid. This authority sometimes is assigned to parents, other times to grandparents and other to the closest references. Contradictory messages sent by these figures of authority may confound children and interfere on their understanding of which behaviors are acceptable to their proper development (McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012; Minuchin *et al.*, 2011; Schuler & Dias, 2015).

Such ambivalent triangulation of grandmothers after marital separation, providing emotional and structural support in the care of grandchildren and participating in family conflicts, is well reflected in Antonia's statement: *"She [paternal grandmother] is that kind of person that interferes in our lives, she has always given opinion about how Alice is raised. But as I always needed her so I could go to work, she stayed with Alice and took her to school. What can I do?"* This is a significant challenge posed to low-income families with young children. They need the support offered by the large family, and must manage the dilution of parental authority in face of the active participation of other adults in their children's lives (McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012; Schuler & Dias, 2015).

The significant increase on marital tension can also lead to the building of many interconnected triangles that go beyond the family system, including representatives of social institutions like hospitals, schools and courts (Bowen, 1991). Justice was another element of triangulation between the ex-couple. Many times participants have expressed the relevance and power of this institution on family relations. The legal context is also attractive to the triangulation and perpetuation of family conflicts, because of its belligerent and adversarial traits (Juras & Costa, 2011). Maybe this topic emerged from a context where participants were recruited, since almost all of them resorted to the Public Defender's Office to claim patrimonial rights and rights related to children, like custody and regulation of visits. To these families, Justice is part of a strength and power game in face of post-separation conflicts, as observed in Antonia's speech: *"Do you know why I went to the Public Defender? I have nobody to help me, I will get that girl and where will I live with her? In my children's house? ... So, I sought Justice. When I went, I told them I was going, I said when I left: 'I'm going to seek for my rights, I will leave here as you want, but you will pay me'".*

When separation occurs, many marital conflicts involve fights for power. This results in competitions, feelings of injustice and fear of loss. Power games in family are ways of winning influence and control, and make the social world

more predictable (Emery, 2012). The symbolic power of Justice on society, mainly on families in this context, may bring ambivalent consequences such as ensuring rights and worsening even more the family disputes (Juras & Costa, 2011).

Another aspect to be considered in the triangulation with Justice refers to the significant gender differences regarding the requests made by participants to that institution. Women's requests to Justice aimed to legitimate their parental roles and confirm their power on decisions related to their children through proceeds on custody and regulation of visits. On the other hand, men tried to legitimate their role as man and father before their families and the society. However, it evidenced that their parental roles are weak before their children and the Justice. The following quotations show examples of such differences:

Elza: *I asked visits to be at his mother's home, with their presence there, not going out, because I don't trust [the ex-spouse], I really don't trust.*

Bruno: *If Benito one day comes to demand me I will say: "Look, son, I tried, I did my best. When you want to see it, it's here, but I didn't get it".*

This result is in line with national and international statistical data that show that despite the slight decline, after separation most children remained living in the maternal family nucleus (Greene *et al.*, 2012; IBGE, 2014). If on one hand maintaining mothers close to their children increases maternal influence and control over them, what could seem to be a privilege, on the other hand it entails overload of responsibilities related to care, education and livelihood, mainly for separated women in lower income layers. These women generally have few or no support of parents to take care and feed their children. This context may lead them to seek more than one job, keeping their children away and exposing them to other contexts of vulnerability (Castillo, 2010; Grzybowski & Wagner, 2010).

Although Fatima seems to be an exception to this cultural standard, since her son - diagnosed with autism - remained with the father after separation, she continued to perform active parental role in care and responsibilities, as she said: *"Up to then I used to go to his [ex-husband's] mother's house to iron. In the beginning of separation I went there, ironed, washed, bathed Fabio, sent him to school".* Parents have agreed on joint parenting and decided to keep the child at the father's residence to privilege his highest interest of keeping his routine and access to school, considering his special situation of development. This dynamic corroborates literature that says that mothers who do not live with their children play more active role than non-residential fathers (Greene *et al.*, 2012).

In addition, it is worth mentioning the difficulties faced by low-income populations regarding access to Justice and fulfillment of their rights. Geographic and symbolic detachment between Justice and population, through the juridical formalism, jointly with costs ensuing from the time-taking judicial services damage the assurance of individual and social rights (Paula, 2012; Juras & Costa, 2011). Although participants have accessed public legal assistance, the slow pace of Justice is incompatible with the urgent needs of the low-income families.

Issues of material and concrete nature permeate the situations of separation and should be considered and legitimated by Justice. When the union is not formalized, as happens with most of the participants of this survey, despite the legal acknowledgement of the non-formalized stable union property system, the construction of assets seems to be more complex and diffuse. The majority of participants lived at domiciles assigned by their families of origin, hindering a fairer and more feasible understanding about the assets division. Non-formalization of the union is an aspect that could damage the assurance of property rights, because the union should be firstly recognized in Justice, and the purchase of assets during the union must be proven. This is not always possible to these families. Therefore, many property rights are disregarded and infringed.

### **Thematic Nucleus 3) Confusions and differentiation of parental and marital roles "He was neither a good husband nor a good father, but he is the father!"**

The main issue in this thematic nucleus, directly related to the previous ones, is the confusion and differentiation of marital and parental roles. The maintenance of marital bonds and the triangulation processes presented in the nuclei above hinder the proper parental relationship with children after separation. Interviews with the participants showed contents of parental links that still reflected unsolved aspects of marital links, and other positive manifestations that privileged the parental role of the ex-spouse.

Separated families are not the only ones to cope with the challenge of distinguishing marital and parental roles. Participants have also reported situations where these boundaries were not clear, even during the marital relation, as shown in Gerson's speech: *"Do you know another thing that caused our separation? Just to show how my intelligence was poor. Because, to do the best to my children, I left her bed and let the children stay".* When the parental couple is still married, the marital and parental subsystems are interdependent, many times confusing, because they are made up by the same dyad. Even in the married family configuration, differentiating these roles is crucial to the healthy family development (Silva & Lopes, 2012).

Some participants were more confused regarding the differentiation between marital and parental roles. Elza, the youngest participant, clearly showed tangled marital conflicts with the former partner, regarding her perception about his parental role, as shown in the speech: *"To me he was neither a good father, nor a good husband".* During her interview, she emphasized feelings of sorrow and anger resulting from marital aspects, notably when her ex-partner left her alone at home with their daughter. Elza also said: *"Because when he could be with her [the daughter] he didn't. Why now, that we are separated, he wants to be with her?"* Although her ex-partner expressed interest in being with the daughter and paid alimony with no court determination, Elza did not recognize his importance in her daughter's life and tried to restrict his right of access to the child.

Besides the attempts of excluding the other parent from the care and participation in the children's lives, participants

showed an understanding that, after separation, children are responsibility of the residential parent, as Bruno stated: *"If the boy lived with me, it was me and he, that's all, you see?"* As it seems, there is a prevailing understanding in the society that breaking the marital ties leads to breaking parental ties and responsibilities, mainly to the parent who does not live with the children. This vision is believed to be related with traditional concepts of marriage tied to family, and with laws that just recently included shared parenting custody in Brazil. These agreements are barely enforced. Disseminating that parental links are an indissoluble tie regardless the family configuration is crucial (Ziviani *et al.*, 2012).

Strict gender values regarding the roles of father and mother also contribute to the detachment from parental relationship after separation. Both male and female participants shared similar beliefs regarding the active participation of mothers in the children's care, while fathers should take on the role of the family provider, as shown in the following speeches:

Claudio: *But I think that the best to the child is to stay with the mother, you know?*

Dalva: *Because woman is there for everything. (...) The father is just useless.*

Gerson: *I can't take the daughters from her: I must work, make a life.*

Considering that most of the children remain living with the mother after separation (Greene *et al.*, 2012; IBGE, 2014) normally fathers drift far after separation. This fact was observed in the participants' histories. Castillo (2010) discussed some variables related to paternal involvement in children's lives. He informed that fathers with lower schooling and from low and middle-income population are more prone to distance from affective and financial support of their children. In these families, where imposition for livelihood is clear, the cost of living's burden is also on fathers. This makes them pay negligible alimonies or refrain from providing this financial support to children. In this sense, and tied to strict gender beliefs, financial and supporting detaching can lead to physical and emotional detachment of fathers, reducing their responsibility and affective ties with the children (Castillo, 2010; Cúnico & Arpini, 2013).

The weakening of parental links after separation is also influenced by persistent conflicts between the parental couple. Participants reported that conflicts still distressed the relationship between them, as Gerson stated: *"I call her; talk to her, many times she hangs up on me"*. Conflicts may arise due to incomplete definitions of family roles and duties (Schudlich *et al.*, 2015). Family life cycle shortened still in the families of origin, and further in the next generation, contributes with this confusion over roles, since the roles of childhood, adolescence and marital life were not duly elaborated and developed (McGoldrick & Shibusawa, 2012).

The parental couple relationship influences the relations that children will develop with parents after separation. The lack of differentiation between parental and marital roles, added with the presence of conflicts and marital violence, can cause deep impacts on the relationship between parents and children. This, in turn, can lead to detachment and even to the exclusion of a parent, typically the father. Such conflicts

and detachment usually cause damages to all members of the family system (Castillo, 2010; Cúnico & Arpini, 2013; Greene *et al.*, 2012; Schudlich *et al.*, 2015).

Another common element in the participants' speech was the disqualification of the other parent in the parental role. Elza's speech shows it: *"I don't think he is a good father"*. Issues related to marital roles influence the negative discourse of the other parent in its parental role. Such disqualification not only expands and privileges marital conflicts, but also points out a context of lack of protection to their children. That is so because it shows a devaluated view on a significant parental authority. It shows the parents' difficulty in prioritizing the well-being and highest interest of children, and can damage their development and expand conflicts and the situation of crisis promoted by separation (Juras & Costa, 2011; Schudlich *et al.*, 2015).

As every human and family process bears contradicting and paradox issues, during interviews some moments analyzed showed some attempts to differentiate parental and marital roles. Even understanding the need for distancing because of the end of marital links, the presence of children perpetuates parental relationships (Ziviani *et al.*, 2012). In this sense, some participants showed respect to the parental role of the other parent in their children's lives, setting marital separation apart from parental maintenance. The following examples show it:

Antonia: *"I noticed that in the beginning she [daughter] got a little angry with him, you know? But I always talked to her: 'Alice, one thing has nothing to do with the other: Nothing to do! He is your father! Whether you want it or not, he is your father'"*.

Bruno: *"Being there on a shoestring of having some link, because she is my son's mother; I will have to keep ties with her forever; but, on the other hand, I want to keep distance, see?"*

These speeches show the challenge posed to separate parents when it comes to understanding that children should not be separated from parents, and that parental links will persist. Parents should understand that parental relationship between parents and children is indissoluble. They should also transmit the importance and soundness of this affective tie after a marital separation. By doing so, they prioritize the well-being of children and adolescents to the detriment of existing conflicts (Juras & Costa, 2011).

Another significant aspect was the qualification of the other parent in the parental role, recognizing their actions of care to the children, as show below:

Claudio: *"She is a great mother."*

Fatima: *"He is great, always was, but now is much better"*.

The positive valuation of the other parent is beneficial to the children's emotional and social development because it reinforces their feeling of family safety (Schudlich *et al.*, 2015). This qualification is particularly important in situations of separation with children, reducing feelings of anxiety and depression in children at this transition moment (Juras & Costa, 2011).

The differentiation between marital and parental roles is crucial in the marital separation process, understanding the end of marital links and keeping the parental relationship. This evidences parental maturity and promotes healthier separation to all family members, mainly the children that should keep family interaction with both

parents and their extensive families. The prioritization of children's and adolescents' well-being and highest interest, and of a relationship with clear boundaries after separation, favors stronger involvement of both parents in the fulfillment of the psychological, affective, protective and livelihood needs of their children (Castillo, 2010; Emery, 2012; Juras & Costa, 2011).

### Final Remarks

The three thematic nuclei built from the individual interviews meet the objective of getting to know the differentiation between parental and marital roles of these families. The recursive movements that bring about unsolved issues related to marital bonds, and the triangulations that keep marital conflict, are aspects that lead to confusing marital and parental roles of low-income separated fathers and mothers. On the other hand, we should contextualize the short time span since separation, in addition to paradox aspects present in the process of building a new family homeostasis.

The process of differentiating marital and parental roles takes place in a paradoxical, contradicting, dialogical and recursive way, with attempts of differentiation and constant setbacks to aspects related to marital links over time. Dialogic and recursiveness proved to be crucial to the system and complex understanding of the results presented herein. Through dialogic, one conceives the contradictions that permeate the same complex phenomenon. Recursiveness, in turn, refers to the consistent interaction and feedback between products and effects as causers and producers of the development process. Moreover, the development and constructing of live systems happen through paradox processes of order, disorder and organization (Esteves de Vasconcellos, 2003). In this sense, the phenomenon of dissolution of marital links analyzed herein evidenced the importance of considering the contradictions found in this process of family transition.

The highlight of this study refers to the population analyzed. Few studies about separation and divorce rely on the participation of the low-income Brazilian population. The survey with these families aim not only to know and understand their realities, but also to report and disseminate their difficulties and skills (Amato, 2010; Minuchin *et al.*, 2011). According to literature, the contents related to thematic nuclei are in line with other family realities. Return to marital links, feeling and grievance for the separation; triangulation processes of children, family members and the Justice; confusions and differentiations of parental and marital roles are aspects highlighted by the literature of separated and divorced families (Juras & Costa, 2011).

However, it is worth highlighting some specificities on how low-income families are organized. Shortened family life cycle; more active participation of grandmothers; recurring disclosures of domestic violence; informality of marital unions; in addition to issues related to the family and social life's concreteness are significant dimensions in low-income separated families. These issues have no direct or causal links with the context of poverty, but

are dialectically and recursively implied. The feeling of powerlessness in face of vulnerabilities and many crises ensuing from break-ups and constant transitions contribute to situations of violence and unclear intra and extra-family boundaries (Minuchin *et al.*, 2011).

The context of referral of participants was a limitation to this survey. Although other services in health area were included in the recruitment stage, authorities bound to Justice made referrals. Although some participants were not in formally litigious proceeds, the legal context stands, in a social light, as an environment of litigation. This contributes to intensify marital conflicts. In this sense, the results presented herein may have been highly influenced by such a belligerent and adverse context. Therefore, further research on this topic should include participants that are users of social assistance and health services that also work with separated low-income families.

Finally, it is recommended that professionals working with this population be attentive to the potentiality moments that eventually emerge from the discourse that many times focuses on problems and conflicts. Focusing and emphasizing the existing resources in family and social relationships contributes to build more positive perspectives of future. Even in situations of long-lasting destructive divorces we can find small elements hidden behind narratives of violence and conflict (Juras & Costa, 2011).

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