Perceived stress and positive and negative emotions in parents of preterm babies

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ABSTRACT

The arrival of a new-born baby drastically changes the parents' lives. Several authors have reached the conclusion that this vital event can even lead to a post-traumatic stress disorder. This fact is especially relevant when it comes to correctly coping with this situation. The role played by the emotions involved in this process as well as the stress suffered by parents experiencing such a change are recognized by previous studies. In this paper, we carried out a comparative study between the emotions and stressful situations experienced by preterm and term babies' progenitors. The results show how the group of parents of preterm babies is more affected by stress and negative emotions. In this sense, the spectrum widens to an almost unprecedented relevant field in psychological research that allows us to see how the parents of premature children experience this circumstance.

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Estrés percibido y emociones negativas y positivas en padres de niños prematuros

RESUMEN

La llegada de un nuevo hijo cambia drásticamente la vida de los padres. Algunos autores han llegado a la conclusión de que estos eventos vitales incluso pueden llegar a producir un trastorno de estrés postraumático. Este hecho es especialmente relevante para afrontar correctamente la situación. Está reconocido el papel que tienen las emociones involucradas en este proceso así como el estrés que sufren los padres que experimentan este cambio. En este trabajo desarrollamos un estudio comparativo entre las emociones y las situaciones de estrés experimentadas en padres con niños que han nacido a término frente a padres de niños que han nacido prematuros. Los resultados muestran cómo el grupo de padres de niños nacidos prematuros sufre más estrés y emociones negativas que el grupo de padres de niños que nacen a término. En este estudio se abre la puerta a un campo relevante casi inédito en la investigación psicológica que nos permite ver cómo los padres de niños prematuros viven esta circunstancia.

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The phase of pregnancy is a vital event in people's lives, both for future mothers and also fathers. Therefore, the moment of birth as well as the caring of the baby define a period of crucial change for progenitors. In this sense, emotions reflect what happens to us; they are signs and symptoms which provide feedback concerning the way we confront different situations. The events lived during the perinatal stage (especially during the first hours after birth) bear great relevance in order to understand the process of changes experienced by progenitors of full-term babies. But what about the parents of premature infants? Prematurity increases the biological and psychological risk factors in babies and parents. The study of preterm birth will allow us to observe the psycho-emotional consequences (disorders of early interaction, exercise of parental roles, the ability to cope with stress, amongst others) that are generated...
by the biological risk factors (neurodevelopmental problems). This
will make it possible to design procedures of intervention adapted
to the needs of children and parents (Karen, Iyano, & Sirota, 2000).

It is estimated that nearly 15 million premature babies (that is
to say, those who are born with less than 37 weeks of gesta-
tion) are born in the world each year (Platt, 2014). In 2015, WHO
reported that the rate of preterm births fluctuated between 5% and
18% (WHO, 2015). In Europe, this rate varies between 5% and
11% depending on the country (Zeitlin, Mohangoo, & Delnôr, 2010).
According to the National Institute of Statistics (Instituto Nacional
de Estadística, INE), each year during the last decade, more than
30,000 children were born prematurely in Spain and more than
1000 of them in the Canary Islands. This represented 6.5% and
6.8% of the population, respectively in 2014 (INE, 2014). There is
a broad consensus that, at birth, age is more important than the
weight, because the former is what really determines the maturity
of the major organs. The immature child has a greater risk of
not successfully completing the process of adaptation to external
and autonomous life, so this critical phase can have medical and
psychological sequelae for the rest of the baby’s life (Horbar et al.,
2002).

The emotional situation of preterm babies’ parents is subject to
high levels of uncertainty and ambiguity. In a couple of hours, the
preterm baby’s situation can change, whether with a positive or
tragic end, or it can continue in an imprecise and uncertain way.
How do parents react to this experience of uncertainty, stress and
fear? Is it advisable to proceed with a professional psychological
plan? How should this plan deal with this situation? Currently,
there is little empirical evidence that helps to answer these ques-
tions.

Psychological stress is considered as “a particular relationship
between the person and environment that is appraised by the
person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endan-
ergising his or her well being” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). When
a person considers that he/she does not have enough resources to
face the situation, his/her well-being can be negatively affected.
Also, if this psychological tension is not dispelled appropriately,
it can lead to mental diseases related to anxiety and depression
(Boullosa, 2004). Besides, it is likely that the birth of a baby (espe-
cially when it is a preterm birth) increases the stress levels and the
negative emotional status of the parents, thus making the develop-
ment of a post-traumatic stress disorder possible (Pierrehumbert,
Nicol, Muller-Nix, Forcada-Guex, & Ansermet, 2003). Proba-
bly, the adequate management of these stressful events can help
to create a more adapted and healthy management of the situation.

Finally, Plutchik’s evolutionary theory of emotions contributes
with a complementary conceptual frame to this quandary. In the
case of premature births, it appears that interactive behaviors are
worthy of particular attention, and their origin depends on multiple
factors. The emotional suffering of parents, especially the mother’s
suffering, has been attributed to the immaturity of the premature
infant, as well as the early separation of the child from the par-
ents (Cnic, Ragozin, Greenberg, Robinson, & Basham, 1983; Miles
& Holditch-Davis, 1997; Muller-Nix et al., 2004). There are studies
comparing the behavior of preterm infants’ mothers with that of
mothers with healthy children born at term. The former are pre-
sented as more active, more vigilant and less sensitive to answer
inadequately to certain baby’s necessities (take longer to perceive
and respond to the baby’s physical and emotional alterations) (Joo,
Choi, Rha, Kwak, & Park, 2015; Muller-Nix et al., 2004; Wijnroks,
1999).

The main aim of this study is to compare the levels of stress
and the emotional state between the parents of premature babies
and parents of infants born at term. This comparison is made in
two different instances; firstly during the first days of the baby’s
life (12–72 h) and finally after 6 living weeks. This will allow us to
recognize the evolution in both groups.

More specifically, what this paper is trying to detect is whether
there is a higher rate of positive emotions instead of negative ones
in the group of parents of full-term neonates, as compared to the
preterm one, and whether these differences are still present with
the passing of time. Also whether there are any existing differences
between the stress perceived by the preterm group in opposition to
the full-term group, both in the first and second phase (first hours
against 6 weeks).

Method

Sample

The sample is made up of 54 parents who have been looked after
at the University Hospital of the Canaries (Complejo Hospitalario
Universitario de Canarias – CHUC) from June 2012 to March 2013.
Women represent 74% of the total sample whereas men represent
26%. There are two different groups, parents of preterm babies and
parents of full-term babies who participate voluntarily. The latter
is made up of 30 participants with an average age of 29.96 years
old, while the group of preterm neonates’ parents is made up of
24 participants with an average age of 32.52 years old (approximately
a 5% of the whole population of preterm babies’ parents at
the province of Santa Cruz de Tenerife).

Instruments

Throughout the development of this work, we have used two
paper-and-pencil questionnaires:

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS: Cohen, Kamarck, &
Mermelstein, 1983). In this case, a scale of 14 items has been
employed and adapted to the Spanish population with an internal
consistency of .81 (alpha coefficient) and a test-retest reliability of
.73. Remor (2006) informs of the meaningful correlations (Pearson)
between the scale of distress (.71) and anxiety (.64).

The Scale of Positive and Negative Affects (PANAS; Watson,
Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). It is divided into two sub-scales: the pos-
tive affect (PA) and the negative affect (NA), each of them with
10 items. What the authors seek is the purest affect descriptors.
The reliability for the NA and PA scales, estimated through alpha
coefficients, was .89 for men and .87 for women in the PA subscale,
while the corresponding alpha in the case of NA subscale was .91
for men and .89 for women (Sandin et al., 1999).

Procedure

The recruitment of participants was carried out in the Univer-
sity Hospital of Tenerife. The sample of full-term babies’ parents
came from the gynecology area. A group of collaborators visited
the rooms where mothers were hospitalized and the latter were
offered the possibility of participating together with their partners.
The same procedure was carried out at the Neonatal Intensive Care
Unit (NICU) with parents of preterm babies. Once the purpose of
the research was explained and participation was accepted, parents
filled in the questionnaires. A brief interview then served to collect
useful data. The same steps were followed 6 weeks later either in
person or via telephone, to gather full data of all participants.

Results

Data analysis

Both groups in the two aforementioned stages, both in the field
of emotions and perceived stress, were compared. For the data
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