Beyond partner intentions: Qualitative findings on fathers’ childbearing intentions

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Study Objectives

Given the public health goal of reducing unintended pregnancy in the United States, significant attention has been paid to improve and better understand the measurement and meaning of unintended childbearing among women. Men’s childbearing intentions, on the other hand, have received significantly less research attention. Those studies that have examined men’s childbearing intentions have several limitations, including examining father’s intentions as reported by the mother, only examining intentions among residential fathers and focusing narrowly on men’s role as a partner as it relates to their intentions. The limited data available at the national level come from an analysis of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) and indicate that, although men characterize 36% of their births as unintended, they concurrently characterize almost two-thirds of the pregnancies that led to these births (62%) as rating a ‘10’ on a 1-10 scale of happiness. In comparison to women in the NSFG, men were significantly happier about the pregnancies than were women, although there were no significant differences in their intention statuses. A few qualitative studies have gone beyond these narrow measurements of childbearing intentions to delve more deeply into men’s perceptions of them; many, however, focus solely on non-residential inner-city fathers. Given the limited attention to-date on men’s childbearing intentions, we sought to expand knowledge and opportunities for further research by talking to men directly. We conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with fathers about their experiences with pregnancy and fatherhood, their ideations of fatherhood, and how they perceive pregnancy intentions. In this paper, we focus on men’s perceptions regarding pregnancy prior to it occurring, their reaction to, and experience of, pregnancy once it occurred and their attitudes towards becoming and being a father. We will also examine the extent to which common language used by researchers to characterize women’s pregnancy intentions resonates with men.

Methods

Sample and Data Collection

Men age 25–44 with a youngest child between one and four years of age were eligible to participate in the study. We excluded those with children less than one year of age for reasons related to the study’s larger research question regarding the consequences of unintended pregnancy. In addition, potential respondents were asked about the wantedness and timing of the pregnancy leading to their most recent birth during the screening process; these two questions mirrored question wording in the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) and were combined to determine whether the pregnancy was intended or unintended.

In-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted in two urban sites—one in Oklahoma and one in Connecticut—selected for geographic variation in order to avoid findings which might reflect conditions specific to one location. Respondents were recruited using both locally-based professional recruiting companies and Craigslist, a popular classified advertisement website. Data collection lasted approximately five days in each site and occurred in May and June of 2014. Verbal and written consent was provided by all participants. Interviews lasted between 60 and 130 minutes, with most lasting about 90 minutes. At the conclusion of the interview, participants filled out a short questionnaire on their sociodemographic characteristics. All participants received $100 cash as compensation. Study protocols and in-depth interview guides were approved by our organization’s federally registered Institutional Review Board.
Instrument
We developed an IDI guide, which was piloted with 11 male respondents in New York City; based on the pilot, minor changes were made to the guide to improve the flow and clarity of questions. Respondents were asked to describe how they felt about their partner becoming pregnant before the pregnancy with their youngest child occurred, about the timing of the pregnancy and how this timing coincided with their peers’ partners becoming pregnant, about the process of pregnancy discovery and decision making (including discussion with their partner), and about the partner’s pregnancy experience and birth itself. We also discussed contraceptive use prior to the pregnancy and whether (and how) respondents’ ideal family size had changed following the most recent birth. In addition, we adopted a strategy used by Barrett and colleagues\(^2\) to include questions asking men to react to common terms used to describe women’s pregnancy intentions and to respond to whether these terms accurately reflected their own pregnancy experiences.

Data Management and Analysis
All of the IDIs were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Initial coding schemes were developed based on the interview guides and existing literature, and were subsequently adapted and updated throughout the coding process. Five members of the research team independently double-coded several transcripts and then met to resolve code differences through discussion and development of new codes. After further double-coding and discussion, all remaining transcripts were coded by at least one member of the research team. We used NVivo 8 to organize the data, code transcripts, and generate code reports.

For this analysis, we are examining groups of codes in relation to where they fall along a spectrum of time surrounding discovery of the pregnancy resulting in their most recent birth, including pregnancy intentions before pregnancy discovery (feelings and intentions, timing, circumstances, ideal family size, fatherhood intentions, timing of fatherhood); pre-pregnancy behaviors and perceptions (contraceptive use or nonuse prior to pregnancy, perception of pregnancy likelihood); pregnancy discovery (reaction, decision making, including consideration of abortion); current characterization of their pregnancy intention; and reactions to pregnancy intention terminology.

Codes of interest have been grouped together, and research team members are each examining one group of related codes. Analysis of these data is underway and ongoing, but below we lay out some preliminary themes that have been identified within each timepoint along the discovery of pregnancy spectrum and illustrate these themes using direct quotes from participants. Respondents are identified using pseudonyms; we include intention status of the most recent pregnancy based on responses to the screener questions for each respondent to provide greater context to the accompanying quote. In the final paper, we will examine themes by intention status of the most recent pregnancy that resulted in a birth as measured at the time of screening for the interview: unwanted, mistimed > 2 yrs, mistimed < 2 yrs, intended and don’t know/unsure. We expect all analysis to be completed by November 2015.

Anticipated Findings
We completed 39 interviews with eligible men in the two sites. Table 1 presents sociodemographic characteristics of respondents according to site of interview.

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Table 1. Selected sociodemographic characteristics of male respondents, by site
Pregnancy intentions prior to discovery of pregnancy

Prior to the most recent pregnancy occurring, men placed a good deal of emphasis on how their partner at the time influenced their feelings towards the possibility of becoming pregnant. Men’s assessment of their partner’s potential mothering abilities played a role in whether they were open to a pregnancy occurring, and several men articulated the idea that they ideally wanted to have only one mother to all of their children.

*And we were together for a while and I knew one day if I ever had a kid, like, I’d rather have it be with her because, you know what I mean, she’d always put her kid first.* (Dennis, pregnancy mistimed < 2 yrs)

*If I was having another baby, I would want it to be with R. because I don’t want to have a whole bunch of kid’s mothers.* (Brian, pregnancy mistimed<2 years)

Many men also held a fatalistic view of their partner becoming pregnant, expressing the idea (similar to what has been documented among women) that “if it happens, it happens.”

Pre-pregnancy behaviors and perceptions

Seemingly aligning with the fatalistic perspective described above, many men used withdrawal and/or other methods of contraception inconsistently prior to the most recent pregnancy occurring. However, when digging deeper into some of the reasons behind men’s contraceptive behaviors, we found that several men didn’t think that pregnancy was likely going to occur and/or perceived themselves as being infertile. In many cases this was due to having been sexually active for long periods of time with no resulting pregnancy and/or use of substances that they perceived as having an impact on their fertility:

*I had this thought that like she wouldn’t get pregnant, like, I don’t know. I thought like, because I had sex with other girls in like the same way and they never got pregnant so like I was thinking “Oh there’s something wrong with me. I don’t have to worry about it.”* (Brian, pregnancy mistimed<2 years)

Others didn’t necessarily think about the possibility of pregnancy, or it wasn’t central on their minds, because they didn’t know or ask about their partner’s contraceptive use. Some men mistrusted their female partners regarding their reported use of contraception, and these and other men described feeling a lack of control in contraceptive decision making with their partner. Finally, among men who described having more than one sexual partner prior to the most recent pregnancy occurring, a few described using contraception less consistently with primary partners while using contraception somewhat more consistently with non-primary partners.
Reaction to pregnancy

Men were asked to think back to how they felt when they first learned about the pregnancy. Several respondents reported that their initial reaction had been shock, worry, and sometimes anger, though often these initial negative reactions turned into happiness as time passed. Many men felt a great deal of responsibility for being involved in the pregnancy, which carried over into needing to step up and “deal with the responsibility” presented by the pregnancy. A common theme was an expression of feeling that the pregnancy required him to meet the challenge of being a man or a realization that he needed to grow up.

As the partner of a woman who became pregnant, men described feeling somewhat removed from decision-making regarding the pregnancy outcome and feeling less agency in having a say in the decision, though for most fathers in our sample, abortion was described as “not an option” either for themselves or their partners. Given the primacy of women’s pregnancy experience, however, men didn’t always share their true feelings regarding the pregnancy with their partners; reactions were sometimes softened for a partner’s benefit:

*Oh I was scared and thinking of everything at the same time. But when she was staring at me and saying, “Hey we’re pregnant and I don’t know what we’re going to do from here” and everything, I had to, it was the thing of, “Okay, I need to be steady as a rock but emotionally everything that I’m going through, I can express later.” (Reggie, unwanted pregnancy)*

Current characterization of pregnancy intentions

When comparing men’s responses to the NSFG screener questions regarding intention of the most recent pregnancy to the way that they described their pregnancy intentions prior to discovering the pregnancy, we found broad discrepancies between the two. Of note, out of the six men who were classified as having had a birth resulting from an “intended” pregnancy based on the screener questions, only one of these men described intentions that aligned with this classification. The others, some of which explicitly described contraceptive method failure as having occurred prior to the pregnancy, used language such as “we didn’t plan it,” or “it wasn’t the time,” language that aligns much more with standard connotations of unintended pregnancies. Several men classified as one of the other unintended pregnancy categories based on the screener questions also seemed to describe circumstances that aligned better with another category (based on language around wantedness and timing), but the differences were not as stark as among the group of men who were classified as “intended” during screening.

Indeed, when men were asked about whether the way they felt about the pregnancy right before it occurred was the same way that they felt about it much later, at the time of interview (and after the resulting child was born), many retrospectively reclassified how they would consider the pregnancy:

*When we started off it was unplanned but it’s kind of weird because it came out to where even though it was unplanned from the beginning, since we first found out I feel like it was planned because I know what my duties are...So yeah, I was happy either way. (Keith, intended pregnancy)*

Terminology around pregnancy intention

Finally, in order to determine how well common terms used to describe women’s pregnancy intentions accurately reflected men’s own perceptions of their pregnancy experiences, we asked men to tell us what they thought of when they heard each of the following terms: unplanned pregnancy, unwanted pregnancy, unintended pregnancy and mistimed pregnancy. When examining the definitions given by all respondents, there was a large amount of conceptual overlap across the terms. Aspects of pregnancy intentions such as types of partnerships, life circumstances and degrees of happiness about the pregnancy
were mentioned as defining features of all of the terms. However, for each term, there were a few unique themes that did emerge.

Unwanted pregnancies had the most negative implications, and were the only type of pregnancy that respondents associated with rape, abortion, adoption and child neglect:

That means a girl that doesn’t want her - that wants to have an abortion - or that doesn’t want to have a kid or wants to have an abortion, in my mind. That tells me, unwanted pregnancy, and I hear it. (Chris, pregnancy mistimed < 2 years)

In comparison, many men seemed to have more neutral attitudes towards unplanned pregnancies, indicating that they can encompass wanted pregnancies, and that the consequences to a couple or individual may not be as severe as those of unwanted pregnancies. When men discussed their perceptions of mistimed pregnancies, many often stressed that these were planned and wanted pregnancies that occurred earlier than planned. Some men also scoffed at the term “mistimed,” stating that the difference between when these pregnancies were desired and when they occurred must have been slight. Finally, men identified many possible definitions of unintended pregnancies, mostly those that overlapped with other categories. Some respondents also questioned the idea that there were any differences between any of the terms, stating that they were all “excuses” for not acting responsibly by not using contraception. Other respondents rejected the idea of planning pregnancies entirely, rendering the terms useless:

I don’t think anybody could say “I am going to get pregnant this time,” so to say “unintended,” unless you are intended-ly having sex every day to try to get pregnant and you are in that mode, like “we want to have a baby,” but I don’t think there is such thing as unintended. I mean, who intends that? Okay, “well let’s have sex this time and have a baby, definitely.” It just happens. Like I said, it’s God’s will. (Jared, unwanted pregnancy)

We expect findings from this analysis will contribute to the growing discussion about men’s roles in childbearing and family formation, as well as shed new light on pregnancy intentions from the father’s perspective.
References