

Thinking about Babies: His, Her, and Their Desire; Does agreement, knowledge or status matter for relationship trouble?

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Abstract

Having a baby is a couple level phenomenon, yet most fertility studies focus on women. Guided by life course theory, we use the couple level data in the first wave of the represented U.S. National Survey of Fertility Barriers to explore the relationship between desire for a baby and perception of relationship trouble. The analytical sample consists of 337 heterosexual couples in which the female partner has not had any children. Couples in which both partners desire a child and the female partner knows her partner's desire have the lowest odds of perceiving trouble in their relationship. Agreement alone, however, is not the key to low odds of relationship trouble. A higher proportion of couples in which both partners do not want a baby have reported relationship trouble. Future analysis will include multinomial regression with key control variables.

Description of Research Question

Having a baby is a couple level phenomenon, yet most fertility studies focus on women. Although there are studies of the association between desire to have a baby and relationship satisfaction for women (Montgomery et al. 2010; Wilson and Koo 2006), there are no studies that incorporate male partner perspectives. The introduction of additional male-partner-specific responses creates a more complete perspective on possible associations between agreement on desire for a baby and perceptions of relationship trouble. Partners can agree or disagree about whether or not to have a baby and whether or not they think that their relationship is in trouble. It is unclear if agreement or not, or desire to have a baby or not, or accurate perception of the partner or not, is the key component contributing to perceptions of relationship trouble. We therefore compare couples based upon level of agreement on having a baby or not and couple agreement on perceived relationship trouble. In future analysis we will incorporate other characteristics of partners and couples that could explain an apparent association between couple baby desire category and couple perceived relationship trouble category.

Not only has this topic rarely been addressed in past research, but the approach through couple-level nationally represented data is unique. We plan to begin the exploration of this fascinating topic through the use of both partner's desires to have a baby as well as the female's perception of her male partner's desire. Our aim is to understand how important baby desire, and partner agreement about baby desire, is for relationships, using perception of relationship trouble as an indicator of relevance.

Previous Literature

Previous studies using Life Course Theory tend to utilize a causal ordering in which relationship stability a cause for the levels of desire to have children. Recent demographic and historical changes in the United States, for example the childfree movement (Blackstone and Dyer Stewart 2012), declining rates of fertility, and the decoupling of marriage and parenthood (Hayford, Guzzo, and Smock 2014), suggest that desire for a baby or not could lead to, rather than reflect, relationship stability.

More studies focus on predicting whether or not women want to have a baby in general (Montgomery et al. 2010; Wilson and Koo 2006) or with a specific partner (Zabin et al. 2000) than on the consequences of wanting a baby or not for relationship stability. There are few contemporary, nationally representative datasets that have data on desire for a baby and perceptions of relationship trouble for both partners. In addition, we know of no studies that include measures of one partner's perception of the other partner's desire for a baby and the partner's response to the same question. There are several reasons to expect that couples will vary in level of agreement, accuracy of perception, desire for a baby and perception of relationship trouble. Our goal is to assess if there is an association between couple level agreement or disagreement on baby desire and couple level perceptions of relationship trouble.

Prior research on couples without children (Gray, Evans, and Reimondos 2013; Umberson, Pudrovska, and Reczek 2010) and the transition to parenthood (Bronte-Tinkew et al. 2007; Claxton and Perry-Jenkins 2008; Don and Mickelson 2014; Keizer and Schenk 2012) provide perspectives on the importance of fertility for relationship stability. Women who are childfree experience more social pressure to have children than women who are involuntarily childless (McQuillan et al 2012).

Life course theory suggests that most heterosexual couples in the United States sooner or later must decide if they will have children or not. Because having children is normative, couples in which both partners desire a child should have higher perceived relationship trouble than couples in which partners disagree or neither desire a child. Yet agreement or lack of agreement could be more important for perceptions of relationship trouble than actual desire for a child status. Even if partners agree about desire for a child, if partners do not know if they agree, then perceived disagreement could be as important as actual disagreement. Alternatively, inaccurate perception of partner desire could indicate an underlying problem in the relationship. The increase in the proportion of women ending childbearing years without having children suggests that more couples will need to think about desire for a child rather than take for granted that if they can have a child they will. This study uses a couple level approach to the role of desire to have or not have children and perceived relationship trouble as well as perceptions of partner's desires and its impact on perceived relationship trouble.

Data

For this research we use data from wave 1 of the National Survey of Fertility Barriers (NSFB), a random digit dialing telephone survey of 4,712 women of childbearing ages (25 to 45) which includes a subset of the women's husbands/partners. The study was designed to assess social and health factors related to reproductive choices and fertility for U.S. women. The first wave was collected in 2004-2006, a second wave was collected 3 years later, but will not be used for the purposes of this study. The data are nationally representative. Black and Hispanic women and women with fertility problems were oversampled, and the appropriate weighting analyses were used to account for the oversampling. Using the American Association of Public Opinion response rate number 4 calculation the response rate for women answering the screening questions is 53 percent. This number is typical for contemporary RDD surveys (McCarty et al., 2006). For further information about the study design and measures access:

<http://sodapop.pop.psu.edu/codebooks/nsfb/wave1/>. To view the public-access data files visit: <http://sodapop.pop.psu.edu/data-collections/nsfb>. Extensive comparisons with Census data indicate the weighted sample is representative of women age 25-45 in the United States.

The subset of data used for this study was restricted to 337 zero parity heterosexual couples. By limiting the sample to these parameters we have allowed for some groups to emerge with very small sizes. Although this may provide some difficulties within analysis, these groups have shown to introduce a novel perspective of how a couple navigates their journey through their individual and shared desire for a baby. This subset of data introduces the distinctive relationship that cannot be measured through other datasets. Without the use of this nationally representative couple-level data the comparison of couple's desires to have a baby and their perceived relationship trouble within a relationship cannot accurately be addressed.

Methods

As a first step in this research project, we provide descriptive statistics, anova, and chi-square analyses. Future research will add Multinomial Logistic Regression to adjust for potential confounding variables. The relationship between couple agreement and desire for a baby and perceptions of relationship trouble may be spurious. Therefore we will add controls for age,

race/ethnicity, education, religiosity, importance of parenthood, economic hardship, relationship status, length of relationship, and relationship satisfaction.

Preliminary Results and Expected Findings

Table 1 and Table 2 are the results of the exploratory analyses completed thus far. Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of the variables we plan to use. The couple perceptions were incorporated in the analysis by combining responses into a combined “interaction” version of the variable. The measure of couple level of desire for a baby also incorporates the accuracy of the female partner’s perception of her male partner’s desire for a child. The couple measure of desire for a baby is the focal independent variable in our cross tabulation shown in Table 2. The dependent variable also captures couple level perceptions of relationship trouble by combining his and her perceptions. Table 2 provides means and proportions of the independent variables by level of couple level relationship trouble. Seven variables differ by level of relationship trouble. Her education, his education, her religiosity, couple level of economic hardship, percent married, and his and her relationship satisfaction differ by couple perceived relationship trouble.

Table 3 provides the focal association between couple desire for a baby and perceived relationship trouble. Three patterns emerged. First, among couples in which both partners desire a baby, a higher proportion of couples perceive no trouble in their relationship than among couples in which partners do not want a baby or disagree. Second, a higher proportion of couples in which women who do not know that they agree with their partner have women only who perceive trouble in the relationship compared to couples in which with women know that they agree or disagree with their partner. Third, among couples who disagree and the female partner knows that they disagree, a higher proportion perceive the relationship as in trouble compared to those in other categories of baby desire agreement and knowledge.

In order to gauge our expected findings we developed the following hypotheses based on our exploratory analyses.

Hypothesis 1: A higher proportion of couples in which partners knowingly agree on their desire to have or not will report little trouble in their relationship.

Hypothesis 2: There will be no significant difference in relationship trouble among couples that knowingly agree on their desire to have or not have a baby.

Hypothesis 3: The couples that unknowingly disagree about their desire to have a baby will not be significantly different in their perception of relationship trouble from the couples that knowingly disagree.

Hypothesis 4: Couples who unknowingly agree about their desire to have a baby will not differ significantly from couples who knowingly agree to have or not have a baby; however, the couples who unknowingly agree will differ significantly on relationship satisfaction from couples who disagree knowingly or unknowingly.

Overall the goals of this study are to address the understudied topic of a couple’s desire to have a baby and perceptions of relationship trouble. Not only has this topic lacked major attention,

but the presence of couple level data does not exist. Through the interaction with other relationship level variables such as overall relationship satisfaction and each partner's view of the importance of parenthood, a clearer image of the mechanisms within the relationship will be achieved. These results will serve as a catalyst for further research which will explore the links between couples agreement, or lack thereof, on their desires to have children and how this is affected or affects their relationship.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for key variables in analysis.

	Mean/P	SD	Min	Max
Age	33.79	6.56	25	45
Age of Partner	36.15	8.40	20	63
Non-Hispanic White	.77	.42	0.00	1.00
Black	.08	.27	0.00	1.00
Hispanic	.09	.29	0.00	1.00
Partner Non-Hispanic White	.75	.43	0.00	1.00
Partner Black	.07	.26	0.00	1.00
Partner Hispanic	.11	.31	0.00	1.00
Her Education	16.25	2.53	3.00	22.00
His Education	15.64	2.83	2.00	22.00
Her Religiosity	-1.35	4.07	-10.47	4.49
His Religiosity	-.69	3.55	-7.81	5.30
Her Importance of Parenthood	2.79	.85	1.00	4.00
His importance of Parenthood	2.64	.92	1.00	4.00
Their Economic Hardship	1.37	.51	1.00	3.67
Percent Married	.83	.38	.00	1.00
Length of Relationship	5.94	5.49	0	24
Her Relationship Satisfaction	.71	.45	0.00	1.00
His Relationship Satisfaction	.66	.48	0.00	1.00
N	337			

Data Source: National Survey of Fertility Barriers Wave 1 (2004-2006); Couples without children.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics by perceptions of relationship trouble type.

	Perceived Relationship Trouble							
	<u>Neither Say Trouble</u>		<u>Men Trouble Women No Trouble</u>		<u>Women Trouble Men No Trouble</u>		<u>Both Partners Say Trouble</u>	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age	33.09	6.35	34.31	6.66	33.60	7.15	34.74	6.52
Age of Partner	35.61	8.37	35.83	8.90	36.53	8.39	37.04	8.24
Non-Hispanic White	.77	.42	.83	.38	.70	.46	.77	.42
Black	.04	.20	.08	.27	.09	.29	.13	.34
Hispanic	.11	.31	.04	.19	.14	.35	.07	.25
Partner Non-Hispanic White	.76	.43	.79	.41	.67	.47	.76	.43
Partner Black	.04	.20	.08	.27	.09	.29	.11	.31
Partner Hispanic	.13	.34	.08	.27	.12	.32	.08	.27
Her Education	16.69	2.74	15.67	2.53	16.21	2.26	15.89	2.16 *
His Education	16.13	2.86	15.57	3.26	14.96	2.59	15.21	2.51 *
Her Religiosity	-.62	3.79	-1.96	4.50	-1.18	4.32	-2.28	3.96 *
His Religiosity	-.42	3.48	-.72	3.70	-.25	3.48	-1.33	3.57
Her Importance of Parenthood	2.84	.82	2.76	.91	3.00	.73	2.63	.91
His Importance of Parenthood	2.67	.92	2.64	.93	2.63	.81	2.59	.98
Their Economic Hardship	1.25	.38	1.40	.54	1.45	.57	1.52	.60 ***
Percent Married	.91	.28	.85	.36	.86	.35	.66	.48 ***
Length of Relationship	5.21	5.33	7.08	6.51	5.91	5.59	6.50	4.94
Her Relationship Satisfaction	.93	.26	.75	.44	.49	.51	.45	.50 ***
His Relationship Satisfaction	.84	.37	.48	.50	.72	.45	.42	.50 ***
N	337							

We use difference in means (ANOVA) or proportions (Chi-Square) as appropriate for continuous or categorical variables.

Data Source: National Survey of Fertility Barriers Wave 1 (2004-2006); Couples without children.

Table 3: Cross tabulation of couple knowledge and agreement on desire to have a baby by couple perceived relationship trouble.

		Male Partner (His), Female Partner (Hers), Female of Male Partner (Her of His) Perception of Desire to have a Baby (Agreement indicates same desire for a baby or not)					
		<u>No Desire Agreement</u>	<u>Knowing Disagreement</u>	<u>Unknowing Disagreement</u>	<u>Unknowing Agreement</u>	<u>Desire Agreement</u>	<u>N Total</u>
Perceived Relationship Trouble	Neither say Trouble	37.0%	36.4%	36.4%	44.4%	49.5%	150 44.5%
	Men Trouble Women No Trouble	16.4%	9.1%	15.2%	0.0%	16.5%	52 15.4%
	Women Trouble Men No Trouble	8.2%	13.6%	12.1%	44.4%	13.0%	43 12.8%
	Both partners say trouble	38.4%	40.9%	36.4%	11.1%	21.0%	92 27.3%
N Total		73 100.0%	22 100.0%	33 100.0%	9 100.0%	200 100.0%	337 100.0%

Data Source: National Survey of Fertility Barriers Wave 1 (2004-2006); Couples without children.

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