

Qualitative Insights for Studying Male Fertility:  
Assessing the Procreative Man

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## Abstract

Drawing on phenomenological, life course, and interactionist theoretical perspectives, as well as insights derived from qualitative in-depth interviews with two samples of men, I discuss issues relevant to assessing men's gendered experiences within the procreative realm. I emphasize the value of focusing on how men's cognitive orientation and experiences with negotiating "family" are critical elements for capturing men's fertility-related experiences during an era in which technological innovations and demographic trends are altering the procreative realm. In addition, I discuss how a full treatment of male fertility phenomena must take into account men's subjective experiences related to their *procreative consciousness*, including *paternity confidence*, *fatherhood readiness*, and *paternal claiming*. Assessments of male fertility will be enhanced when a full range of social demographic and social psychological issues is explored through survey and qualitative inquires while integrating male fertility and fatherhood research. Armed with an understanding of how some male interviewees try to present a masculine self, interviewers are encouraged to use strategies for enhancing men's survey responses and narrative constructions concerning procreative issues.

Whether measuring aspects of male fertility using standard survey items or exploring men's procreative lives using qualitative in-depth interviews, researchers face significant methodological challenges. The challenges, stemming in part from the gendered realities of reproductive physiology, vary in form and magnitude due to the basic research objectives of survey (demographic) and qualitative (interpretive) methods. Specific research questions can accentuate particular challenges.

Obviously, verifiable genetic paternity, legal paternity, social paternity, and social fatherhood represent different ways of capturing men's experiences in relation to children. Researchers therefore need to provide men opportunities for defining their circumstances as clearly and fully as possible while at the same time minimizing interviewing conditions that might foster intentional or unintentional reporting bias. This latter effort will hinge, in part, on interviewers—particularly those doing qualitative work—recognizing and effectively managing men's strategies for presenting a masculine self that emphasizes control, autonomy, and rationality (Marsiglio, 2003; Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2002). Unfortunately, the quality of men's self-report data on genetic paternity is subject to women's decisions about divulging their pregnancies to them, but researchers can still foster opportunities for capturing a broader, more refined gamut of data on male fertility and "familial" experiences. By doing so, researchers of varying ilk will be better equipped to fashion a more compelling story about men's procreative and family lives.

My comments on assessing male fertility accentuate the context and processes surrounding men's varied and gendered experiences within the procreative realm. I frame my insights, gleaned in part from qualitative in-depth interviews with men, by selectively drawing on phenomenological, life course, and interactionist theoretical perspectives. I have two broad

objectives. First, I seek to show how insights generated from qualitative work can inform survey strategies for studying male fertility-related experiences. Second, although systematic analyses of quantitative data can sharpen our understanding of men's fertility reports, qualitative research produces unique insights significant in their own right about the subjective aspects and processes surrounding men's fertility experiences. I identify and discuss several key social psychological concepts central to understanding men's fertility-related experiences. Although it is critical to measure/assess the full complement of fertility-related experiences that men may encounter (e.g., sex, contraception, infertility, pregnancy scare, conception, pregnancy, abortion, miscarriage, and birth), I restrict my comments to pregnancies, births, and infertility.

Because the social demographic, cultural, and technological landscape of the United States and elsewhere has changed rapidly in recent decades, researchers need to examine how these changes affect the context for men's fertility perceptions and behaviors. For example, discussions about measurement and assessment issues need to acknowledge the complexity of current demographic patterns and the dynamic qualities of men's personal lives. In addition, when discussing births and infertility a comprehensive assessment of male fertility requires a data collection approach that accounts for how new technological developments may affect the context for male fertility.

I emphasize the value of focusing on how men's cognitive orientation, life course circumstances, and romantic relationship dynamics, can be critical aspects of how men interpret and report previous as well as projected fertility-related experiences. Accounting for these interrelated contextual elements can enhance both survey and qualitative research. I underscore the value of developing methodologies that will enhance opportunities to study the processes surrounding men's procreative experiences. Qualitative researchers are best suited to explore

how men's experiences occur within a socially constructed context where they and others interpret and negotiate their understanding of fertility and family relations.

### **Primary Data Sources**

My comments are based in part on primary data from a combined sample of 106 men who participated in in-depth interviews I conducted during the past five years. These participants were involved in either a study of 70 men (69 single, 1 married) exploring the procreative identities of men 16-30-years-of-age (Marsiglio and Hutchinson, 2002) or a study of 36 men who were acting as "stepfathers" to their romantic partner's children (Marsiglio, in press-a, b). The overall mean age for this pooled sample is 26.5. Sixty-six self-identified as White, 27 African-American (including 2 bi-racial), 8 Hispanic, 2 Native American Indian, 2 Native African, and 1 Asian-American. At the time of the interview, 3 participants were still in high school, 4 were high school dropouts, 21 had completed high school but had no college experience, 53 had some college experience, and 25 had graduated from college. Because the eligibility criteria for the first study required men to be single, only 25 of the participants in the combined pool of participants were married, 14 were cohabiting with a partner, and the rest were technically single. Extensive questions regarding men's procreative histories were asked only of the 70 men in the initial study. Among these men, 40 had no pregnancy or fertility experience; 15 had partners who had aborted a pregnancy; 8 were involved with a partner currently pregnant with their child; 5 had experienced a miscarriage; and 9 had biological children prior to the interview. Meanwhile, among the 36 men in the stepfather study, 5 men had formally adopted their romantic partner's child, and 22 had fathered their own biological child—3 with the birth mother of the stepchild.

I recruited men for the first study using a combination of strategies designed to maximize diversity in participants' procreative life experiences. Men were contacted through a local department of motor vehicles office, abortion clinics, a prenatal clinic, a prepared-childbirth class, a local employment agency, a homeless shelter, personal contacts, and word of mouth. To be eligible, men had to indicate that they had dated a woman or had been divorced within the previous three years. Men who participated in the stepfather study were recruited through announcements in a university hospital newsletter, a listserv directed at various university departments, and a local parenting magazine. Flyers were posted at a variety of sites throughout the community (e.g., community health center, fire-station, homeless shelter, and churches) and a number of participants were also recruited through word of mouth. To be included, the men had to describe themselves as being actively involved in the lives of their romantic partner's children who were 19 years of age or younger and living with the mother.

### **Cognitive Orientation and Assessing Male Fertility**

Assessing male fertility in a broad and nuanced way necessitates that researchers address the contextual and subjective dimensions to men's procreative lives, including their involvement with pregnancies and births for which they claim full or tentative responsibility. This approach attends to how men frame their views on paternity, social fathering, family, and the "package deals" involving romantic relationships and children.

From an interpretive and qualitative perspective, an important objective in studying the wide range of male fertility experiences is to better understand the subjective/psychosocial dimensions to men's cognitive and emotional ways of orienting toward their ability or inability to procreate. Researchers have explored men's knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, intentions,

motivations, and symbolic meanings related to various experiences within the procreative realm (Jaccobs, 1995; Marsiglio, 1998; Marsiglio and Hutchinson, 2002; Miller, 1992; Webb and Daniluk, 1999). This domain of research addresses key individual and interpersonal processes not captured by typical demographic fertility variables.

### **Procreative Consciousness**

Some of my work focuses on how young men become aware of their presumed ability to procreate and how men express aspects of this knowledge in their everyday lives. Schutz's (1970a, b) phenomenological approach to consciousness, with its emphasis on understanding how cognitive *relevance structures* and *stocks of knowledge* guide individuals' information processing, theoretically informs my framework. Similarly, the symbolic interactionist and life course perspectives provide useful insights, including the notion that some men experience turning points that alter fundamentally their procreative identity (Strauss, 1969). From a theoretical and programmatic perspective, much can be gained by developing a more nuanced conceptual and empirical understanding of how men develop, activate, and express their procreative consciousness.

Simply put, procreative consciousness is a broad and multilayered concept that includes the varied cognitive and emotional expressions of awareness men experience in the procreative realm, including their perceptions of their prospective children not yet born. Elsewhere I have discussed the significance of differentiating between how men's procreative consciousness is expressed in specific situations versus instances in which it is manifested in a more global, enduring way (Marsiglio, 1998; Marsiglio and Hutchinson, 2002). Similarly, I distinguish between men's procreative consciousness molded and co-constructed by their interactions with a

romantic partner from their awareness stemming from autonomous, individual reflection. An important form of procreative consciousness—with significant programmatic relevance—deals with the varied responsibilities (defined in multiple ways) associated with the ability to create human life.

### **Forms of Procreative Knowledge**

An important subjective aspect of procreative consciousness includes three forms of knowledge men can possess related to their procreative abilities: *basic understanding of male reproductive physiology*, *perceptions of personal potency*, and *confirmed paternity status*.

*Understanding male reproductive physiology.* This type of knowledge refers to men's basic understanding of male reproductive physiology as well as their presumed ability to procreate given the “right” set of circumstances. My research revealed that young men typically develop this knowledge sometime between their 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> birthdays and this understanding primarily emerges through sex education and discussions with parents and friends. Though it is often not a remarkable transition for most young men, some suggest that it had a significant impact on how they thought of themselves with some indicating that it scared them.

*Personal potency perceptions.* A second, and related form of knowledge involves men's view of their own level of potency. Although many men simply take it for granted that they are capable of impregnating someone without having a clear sense of how potent they are, others may have a more decisive view that they are either extra potent, subfecund, or infertile—views that are subject to change based on personal experiences. This latter point is illustrated by two divorced men who spoke about how they had come to believe that they were incapable of impregnating a woman due to their experiences with their former wives. Several years of

unprotected intercourse resulting in no pregnancies lead them to develop a procreative consciousness replete with a self-image as infertile. In both cases, their self-images prompted them to be nonchalant about contraceptive use in their most recent committed sexual relationships, a decision that presumably lead to their partners becoming pregnant and having children. As one of these men, 27-year-old Jack, describes his situation, “I didn’t think I could get anybody pregnant...because of my past relationship with my ex-wife and everything. She had been checked out by all the doctors and she was normal, was fine. And you got to ask the question.” Jack then talks about how his current partner helped reinforce his self-perceived subfecund status by making it “real easy not to wrap up [use condoms]. She was like maybe you need to go to a doctor and get checked out...I was embarrassed to go down and get something like that done. It’s hard to think that something’s wrong with ya, but then a couple of weeks after that she was pregnant.”

Men’s procreative self-knowledge and views of their fecundity, including their emotional reactions to it, becomes increasingly important to consider in light of what appears to be a large and growing proportion of men experiencing individual, partner, or couple-based infertility (Environmental Causes of Infertility, 2003; Pasch and Christensen, 2000). More needs to be learned about what types of men experience these conditions and what it means to them (Greil, 1997). No doubt it will be challenging to obtain high quality survey data from a representative national sample of men about their possible struggles with male-factor infertility given the stigma associated with it, and some men’s penchant for presenting a masculine self during interviews (Mason, 1993; Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2002). However, the issue’s significance, as well as the paucity of social science data on male infertility, warrants gathering survey data that would provide a social demographic portrait of those who have experienced it. It may even be

possible to measure men's psychosocial reactions to male-factor infertility (and female or couple-based infertility) using survey items. Webb and Daniluk's (1999) phenomenological in-depth interviews with six men reveal that men have valuable things to say. These men talk about what infertility has meant to them and how they have dealt with it. This select sample of white men who reflected on infertility after they had achieved fatherhood through adoption or donor insemination expressed "intense feelings of grief and loss, powerlessness and lack of control, inadequacy, isolation, and betrayal in response to being unable to father a child" (pp. 20). Additional qualitative work that assesses men's experiences with infertility prior to becoming fathers is clearly needed.

*Confirmed Paternity Status.* Men often acquire a third type of knowledge when their procreative status is confirmed by one or more of their partners, or in an increasing number of cases, through DNA testing. From an interactionist perspective, the process of a man having his paternity status verbally confirmed is part of either a tacit exchange in which individuals implicitly agree not to disagree, or it involves an explicit negotiation whereby the man challenges the woman's claim, or vice a versa. My research (see also Waller, 2002) indicates that these tacit understandings and explicit discussions are critical to how men launch their relationships with children, and manage their involvement with the mothers of the children.

These discussions sometimes are prompted and influenced by family members who have a vested interest in establishing or refuting a man's paternity status. Ed, a 22-year-old self-proclaimed father of five children to three different mothers, provides a distinct example of how a mother can play a prominent role in shaping her son's thinking about his paternity. When asked about his degree of confidence that the children discussed during his interview were in fact

his biological children, he shares how his mother has played a decisive role in determining his paternity status.

When it's about a baby, the first thing I say is take it [to] my mamma's. . . cuz my mamma, she'll know, she'll look at the baby an, she'll just say, "Yeah and if that ain't my baby, and she'll look at it, like this one girl tried to say I, she [made] my baby, my mamma looked at her, looked at the baby, and told her, "Girl, if you don't get up out my house bout this my damn son child, this ain't my son child, this one 'em nigger child, either you just don't know who you baby daddy is, or this is mine," she'll tell you. My mama, she look at the nose, the eyes, and the ears, and sometimes she look at the set of teeth because she, I don't know what is, but she be knowing. She know all along though.

Here we see how an informal family ritual provides this young man a boost of confidence in determining his paternity status in specific cases. Although presumably rare, this scenario highlights the fluid and negotiated nature of the paternity confirmation process. Understanding the informal practices by which a man realizes his degree of paternity confidence is important because they are embedded within a larger social and community context that can influence a man's emotional and legal connections to a child.

Prior to the accessibility of DNA testing, men had limited practical options for refuting a partner's paternity claim aside from relying on visible post-birth evidence showing discrepancies between the man and the baby (e.g., racial). Today, DNA technology has reshaped the parameters for interpersonal negotiations regarding paternity claims and enabled the government to assume a more prominent role in establishing legal paternity (Howe, 1993; Wattenberg, 1993).<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, demographers' standardized, closed-ended questions asking men to report on the children they have had are not well-suited to sort out the rich complexities associated with men's multifaceted and sometimes muddled interpretations of their fertility history. Men may, for instance, possess varying levels of certainty about whether they are in fact the biological fathers of particular children. They can also acknowledge particular children as theirs in various

ways. In a survey format men may claim to have two children, but only be convinced in one instance that the child is genetically related to them. Without differentiating men's level of certainty about their paternity in regards to individual children, and without clarifying aspects of whether and how they acknowledge children as theirs, differential treatment of those children may actually be due to factors not typically measured in demographic surveys. Aside from their legal responsibilities, men's subjective willingness to claim children as their own may have subtle and not so subtle consequences for how they treat those children (e.g., abuse, financial, nurturance, protective). Although most of the men in my research apparently felt confident that their current/former partner's child was theirs, this was not always the case. I did not systematically ask all participants about their degree of *paternity confidence* but the confusion about paternity that sometimes emerges is illustrated by 20-year-old Reginald's comments regarding a partner's child for whom he had been around for the pregnancy and birth.

I feel like it [child] ain't, and sometimes then, I don't know why. But, then, it show little mannerisms, and a little of my charisma sometimes, as young as it is, but maybe it just might be that the baby is bein' like that, so it might not be my mannerisms....[S]he [partner] say if I want to take a blood test, take it, but she might be usin' reverse psychology on me.

Later in this interview, Reginald admits that he would probably feel closer to this child if he knew for sure that he was the biological father.

The nuances of paternity confidence are exemplified further by the unusual set of circumstances Allen faced with two children. For this 27-year-old high school dropout, paternity confidence was relevant because he presumed he was the biological father to a child produced through a one-night-stand with a woman who was engaged to someone else at the time, Norman. While pregnant, the woman told Allen that she was pregnant with his child and they agreed to

secrecy, allowing Norman to marry her and claim the child as his. Allen, known as a friend of the family by the child, Donny, chose not to have a DNA test because he did not want to disrupt Donny's son-father relationship with Norman—a relationship that has persisted even though Norman and Donny's mother are now divorced. Asked how he knew that Donny was his biological son when he met the 5-year-old boy for the first time, Allen says, “[B]ecause, I think when you look into your own eyes and you can tell, you know, that’s my biological son.” Even though Allen became romantically involved temporarily with Donny's mother after she and Norman divorced, Allen has never sought to claim Donny as his child in a fully public way. However, Allen's mother and another girlfriend, Barbara, are aware of his predicament. With Barbara, Allen also chose to assume responsibility for her child that he was pretty sure initially was not his biological offspring but whom he hoped was his child.

I gave him his first bath like dads do in the hospital...I knew that he might not be [mine], but I looked at him and swore that he was because he had those toes, little crooked toes, like everyone in my family has. . . He looked like a little Sicilian baby, like I remember my brothers and sisters looking. . . And I said “Man he’s mine.”. . .The possibility was still there that it wasn’t. I didn’t, at that point, even see a reason to do a DNA test. . . you know, look at him.

A few months after the child's birth Barbara convinced Allen to take a paternity test; Allen reluctantly obliged. Even though the DNA test confirmed that he was not the child's genetic father, he asserted that he wanted to treat the child as though he was his son. He downplayed the praise he received from Barbara's family for claiming her son as his. “It ain't about being a big man, it's I love him, and that's the bottom line. . . it doesn't matter to me that he is somebody's else's. Every baby deserves a father. . . . I've got a choice to do what I'm gonna do and I did it out of pure love.”

Although Reginald's and Allen's stories alert us to the complexity of how men can think about their paternity status, it is difficult to assess the value of developing paternity confidence as

a descriptive or theoretical concept. Researchers have yet to: determine the scope and demographic portrait of men's paternity uncertainty; measure the ways paternity confidence is expressed; or consider to what extent and in what ways paternity confidence affects men's relationships with *their* children. However, various trends have coalesced in recent years to raise this concept's visibility: some scholars have considered paternity confidence in the context of different types of societies (Alexander, 1979; Betzig, 1993; Cronin and Curry, 2000; Gaulin and Schlegel, 1980; see also Baker, 1996); grass roots organizations in numerous states have emerged to challenge false paternity claims using legal and advertising strategies; three times as many paternity tests were conducted in 1999 (280,000) than in the previous decade; and the media appears to be expanding coverage of disputed paternity cases. As a consequence, the media may be affecting public awareness by widely disseminating estimates of the relatively large proportion of children who may be involved with men who have been duped into thinking they are the biological fathers (Birks, 2002). Though firm evidence is lacking, some suggest that misattributed paternity may be higher among lower income populations (Baker, 1996). Over time, growing numbers of men as well as social service and legal professionals working with families are likely to become more sensitive to the prospects of false paternity claims in situations involving an unplanned pregnancy and a separation/divorce.

Both survey and qualitative researchers alike can engage in pilot research to explore the utility of the paternity confidence concept. For example, national or regional surveys might include items, using a scaled set of responses (e.g., none, a little, quite a bit, complete), that would ask men to indicate how much confidence they have that specific children are related to them biologically. Such an item could prove useful because paternity confidence issues may contribute to the vexing problem documented in longitudinal survey data in which men report in

their fertility history and/or household record having a certain number of biological children during one interview, then report a lower number in a subsequent wave of data collection (Mott and Gryn, 2001). Although some of this misreporting is likely due to men's inclination to not acknowledge children born to a previous romantic partner—especially when the child lives elsewhere, the reporting error may also be influenced by men's evolving interpretation of and response to their degree of confidence that particular children are in fact their biological offspring. If data on the subjective assessment of paternity confidence were collected from representative samples, demographers could document how men's reports of paternity uncertainty correlated with social demographic and partner-relationship patterns. Analyses of this sort would augment demographers' efforts to develop their own demographic profile of male fertility records for which they have assigned "low confidence" (Mott and Gryn, 2001). The assignment of a "confidence level" to evaluate the quality of a male respondent's paternity scenario for each reported child is based on the consistency of "cross-linkable data elements" using multiple waves of survey data. Another data element that could be added to the mix, then, is men's self-reports of how confident they are that a particular child is theirs.

Qualitative researchers can bring their expertise to this question by asking men to discuss in-depth how confident they are that they are the biological father of particular children and how varying degrees of uncertainty make them feel. Where uncertainty is an issue, interviews could explore how it has been negotiated or "resolved" over time.

In light of men's inclination to manage a masculine self in an interview setting, survey and qualitative interviewers should consider using gender-sensitive strategies to foster candid responses when asking about paternity confidence and other issues that may implicate men's masculine identity. They might for instance, preface their question about paternity confidence

with an acknowledgement that other men have voiced their uncertainty about whether particular children are biologically related to them. Those interested in doing qualitative research in this area might recruit volunteers from genetic testing services, including men with positive or negative results, and ask them to talk about their perceptions and feelings concerning their paternity status prior to and after the test.

Another subjective dimension associated with male fertility that can be measured through survey techniques or qualitatively explored is men's perceptions about being ready for fatherhood. My qualitative research highlights several prominent themes related to how men determine and express their sense of readiness. I mention two here. First, men's *degree and form of collaboration* highlights the extent to which and how men jointly construct their sense of readiness by discussing key issues with someone else (e.g., partner, parent, friend). Although men often appear to construct their readiness views by themselves, some incorporate others into the process. Of particular importance are situations where men's discussions with their partners help them clarify their sense of readiness. Second, men's *focus of attention* can be either on themselves, the potential child, their partner, or some combination. In a related vein, men are free to attend to certain types of substantive issues such as potential loss of leisure time, financial responsibilities, and emotional and psychological well-being. Insights about how men use these and other mechanisms to frame their views about becoming a father will sharpen understanding about the subjective context within which men approach fertility issues.

Fatherhood readiness can be viewed as a conceptual bridge for studying subjective aspects of male fertility and fathering. Questions about readiness can be asked prior to a pregnancy, during a pregnancy, or after a child has been born. Of course, the meaning of the survey or qualitative data gathered at different points in time will be open to various

interpretations, but it should help to expand the conceptualization and measurement of key concepts related to fertility intentions and pregnancy intendedness (Bachrach and Newcomer, 1999; Luker, 1999; Peterson and Mosher, 1999; Santelli et al., 2003).

Terrance, a 25-year-old man who self-identified as being poor, illustrates how perceptions about male fertility and fathering are related. Reflecting on his readiness to become a father, Terrance says:

[When] I was younger I didn't, definitely didn't, want to have one [a child], and it was like definitely no possibilities of me being able to take care of one, or supporting one, or teaching one, a baby, anything. But now I'm a little older, and I think that if I could support one, now would be, like 25 to 30 would be an excellent time to have, excellent time to have a kid. But only if I would, if I could give them anything I wanted to. If I could give my kid whatever I chose to give him, without a problem. If I saw something and I was like, "All right, I want you to have this," I could get it for him. I don't want to have one until I can definitely do that.

For Terrance, the father role of breadwinner is paramount to his sense of being ready to produce and raise a child.

### **Negotiating Family**

Assessing aspects of male fertility is particularly complicated in a society where family formation, family interaction, and dissolution patterns deviate from a traditional nuclear family model. I highlight several key issues implicating stepfathers while accentuating how subjective dimensions to creating "family" are negotiated with reference to genetic, social, and legal aspects of paternity and social fatherhood.

### **Stepfather Fertility Perceptions**

As more men form relationships with women who have given birth to another man's child, understanding the relationship between single men and stepfathers' parental and fertility

motivations takes on greater importance. The life course and symbolic interactionist traditions provide a valuable lens to consider male fertility within a context that emphasizes stepfathers' experiences. Although relatively little is known about stepfathers' fertility motivations (Stewart, 2002), my qualitative work reveals men's wide-ranging perceptions (Marsiglio, in press-a).

For stepfathers who are not fathers, their motivations to have biological children may be similar to first time fathers. Meanwhile, stepfathers with or without biological children may feel that having a new child with their partner who is already a mother may help integrate them into and expand their stepfamily. In other words, having a child can provide them a way to negotiate and reconfigure the parameters of their family. Alternatively, some men report that loving a stepchild satisfies their paternal desires and that they are reluctant to have a biological child because they fear that doing so would limit what they could do with and for their stepchild.

Carl's situation illustrates how some stepfathers think about having children and define their stepfamily. Having no biological children of his own, Carl describes his powerful feelings for his 8-year-old stepchild, Vicky. "I wanted a child biologically, but now it just seems that there's no need for it because I have everything I want and could ever possibly imagine having in a nonbiological child. I don't see Vicky as anything but my child." Asked if he wants to go through a pregnancy with his wife, Carl responds,

We've talked on and off about it. The main reason for us not doing anything at this point is just – is almost purely a financial – just because having an extra child would not allow us to do some of the things that we do for Vicky now – private school and some of the shopping and things like that."

Carl has even resisted his wife's gesture to have a child with him if he wanted one.

Meanwhile, 26-year-old Alan, a stepfather to a 7-year-old boy, Danny, feels comfortable around the boy, but he is eager to experience biological paternity. As he says,

I don't have any kids, and I wasn't really trying to have no kids cause I'm still young. I still got about a lot to learn; a lot to live. And since we've been together she's been pregnant, but she lost the baby, so I'm still trying. I'm married so I'm tryin' to have a kid-- it's hard. Real hard. And she say, she like to say, cause I always be tellin' her you know, you got to get pregnant but I want a little girl. That's what I really want. Well you don't love Danny.? Yea I love Danny. But I also want something I made.

So, for Alan, biological paternity is firmly rooted in his “wide-awake” consciousness and in some ways may be activated often because of his daily interactions with Danny.

Compared to Alan, Carl’s approach to paternity is more clearly related to Stewart’s (2002) analysis using two waves of data from the National Survey of Families and Households (1987–1988; 1992–1994) that found that spouses think about each other’s children when they develop their own fertility intentions. However, unlike stepmothers, stepfathers’ fertility intentions are influenced as much by their partner’s children as their own previous biological children. This finding contradicts other research showing that men with lower socioeconomic status who become stepparents gain a “fertility benefit” because their partner is more likely to have a child with them (Anderson, 2000). Instead, the former study suggests that men may forgo the chance to have their own children in exchange for securing a partner. When stepfathers relate well to their stepchildren they may have less incentive to procreate.

The presence or absence of men’s own children in a stepfamily household may be another factor that shapes stepfathers’ fertility desires. Some research suggests that stepfathers who have children of their own, compared to those who do not, “feel more companionship with their stepchildren, experience more intimate stepfather–stepchild interactions, are more involved with their stepchildren’s friends, feel fewer negative feelings about stepchildren, and have fewer desires to escape” (Gagnon and Coleman, 1994, 83). An earlier analysis of national data found that stepfathers who lived with both stepchildren and biological children, compared to their counterparts who only lived with stepchildren, were more likely to report perceptions consistent

with having a fatherlike identity (Marsiglio, 1995). Future research should focus on differentiating stepfathers' views on social fathering and biological paternity while exploring the extent to which they are intertwined and expressed through their fertility experiences within stepfamilies.

### **Claiming Stepchildren**

Although male fertility assumes a biological link between men and their offspring, a more nuanced discussion of paternity and fathering calls for a broader treatment of men's relationships to and responsibilities for children. Toward this end, I recently used a sample of stepfathers to develop a detailed conceptual analysis of a state of mind and relationship orientation that I label *paternal claiming* (Marsiglio, in press-b). By focusing on how a man expresses a readiness to nurture, provide for, protect, and see a child as though the child were his own, paternal claiming includes emotional, psychological, practical, and often symbolic aspects. Although paternal claiming for biological fathers is closely tied to procreative knowledge and paternity confidence as described previously, it extends beyond those ways of "knowing" because it implies men's willingness to invest some combination of time, energy, resources, and emotions into their relationship with their child.

Obviously, knowledge of genetic paternity compels most men to engage in some form of paternal claiming, but as interpretative and phenomenological approaches to social life reveal, other interpersonal and familial processes can lead men to claim other men's children as their own too. Much can be learned then by focusing on how stepfathers develop and express paternal claiming and act as social, sometimes legal fathers to children who are not their biological offspring.

My previous grounded theory work generated ten properties clarifying the way some stepfathers orient toward stepchildren as their own. It also suggested several conditions that may foster this orientation. Among the ten properties, three interrelated ones are of particular interest when advocating an integrated approach to improve contemporary assessments of male fertility and fathering: *degree of identity conviction*, *paternal role range*, and *solo-shared identity*.

In my research, men were apt to express, on their own and in response to my questions, the extent to which and how they fit into their stepchildren's lives. They often relied on a paternal or quasi-paternal frame of reference as they described their connections with stepchildren in general terms as well as in more practical ways involving money, discipline, protection, guidance, child-care, and affection. Some of their stories included implicit references to their desires to develop and sustain a familial sense of "we-ness." Vern, a father of three and stepfather to two, simplifies his everyday reality in a manner not uncommon for other stepfathers. "We [Vern and his wife] have since dropped that little fiction of I have three and she has two. We have five children and we just kind of treat it that way." Herman, speaking of his expectation that his stepchildren would be well-behaved, reasons, "maybe they didn't come from my loins, but now they belong to me, so I expect the same behavior from them that I put forth." Although these expressions of paternal claiming are not representations of male fertility per se, they do represent important opportunities for men to commit to and invest in children within the context of the men's romantic relationships. In some instances this type of paternal claiming is experienced as a substitute for male procreation and biological fatherhood.

*Degree of identity conviction.* Among stepfathers in particular, men differ in how fully they embrace a child as theirs. The depth of men's convictions may be expressed in terms of them feeling only partially like a father or perhaps having an intermediate level of conviction.

Some stepfathers express a deep, unconditional commitment to their stepchildren and see them as their *own*, whereas others have much weaker convictions. What accounts for men's varying perceptions? Some may be affected by how they feel about specific roles (e.g., disciplinarian, provider, legal guardian) or a stepchild's physical proximity to them at a given point in time, including whether their stepchild is presently residing with them. Stepfathers involved with stepchildren who split much of their time between the biological father's and birth mother's home may have a much more heightened sense of "owning" a stepchild when the child is currently under their roof, and subject to their rules and financial circumstances. Robby, referring to his stepchildren, says "To me, they are mine, when they're with me they are mine. So I, I treat them just like I would my own daughter, buying them things and whatever." This type of sentiment reflects the potentially fluid nature of men's perceptions. Comments like this should also inspire survey researchers to consider how they might augment their household roster questions in order to address in a more substantive manner stepfathers' perceptions about their stepchildren and their living circumstances.

*Paternal role range.* Men's degree of conviction for claiming a stepchild/child may depend on which stepfather/father roles are in question. Consequently, assessing men's perceptions about the range of ways they can experience a sense of claiming may be valuable. Whereas some men may feel like fathers because they help children dress, pack their lunches, read bedtime stories to them, or supervise their school work, men may not feel comfortable disciplining children or providing for them financially if they are not their own biological offspring. For example, Tim is a 31-year-old father of two preschool boys whose mother has physical custody of them while he lives with his fiancée and her two youngest daughters, two and three years of age. The girls call Tim "daddy" and he admits to feeling like and acting like a

father to them; he changes diapers, dresses them, feeds them, and disciplines them as though they were his own children. However, Tim is reluctant to assume official financial responsibility for the girls at this point because it would terminate the biological father's child support obligations. He is also worried because he is not yet married to their mother. Although Tim has come to see himself as a father to these two girls, his conviction is only partial because he is still contemplating whether it makes sense to take on the financial role completely.

*Solo/shared father identity.* An intriguing property of claiming a stepchild involves whether a man feels he is solely responsible for a stepchild or shares a paternal status with the biological father. Similarly, a biological father may or may not feel as though a stepfather shares a paternal status with him. When the biological father is not involved with the child or is involved only minimally, a stepfather will tend to have more leeway asserting a strong paternal claim. But a stepfather can still claim a child symbolically as "his" even if the father is actively involved. Thirty-five year-old Eddie found himself in this situation with his eight-year-old stepdaughter.

Sometimes I feel like I'm on the outside looking in because – sometimes I wish she was mine. I guess because we're just that close. . . . in my heart, I feel like I'm her father. . . . I know in reality, I'm not but, I'm going to give her all the benefit that a father should. I'm going to make sure she gets those benefits. Even though her dad is giving them to her, she is given a little extra and I figure that extra go a long way.

Recognizing that his stepdaughter is not really "his" per se, and that her father is there for her, providing her with benefits, Eddie still feels like a father who can supplement the biological father's contributions. The practical consequence of this kind of shared father identity scenario is that the child is likely to accrue significant benefits if the biological father is active, and the stepfather respects the father's place in the child's life while simultaneously making a concerted effort to help the child in a fatherly way (White & Gilbreth, 2001).

Some stepfathers even make it easier for biological fathers to maintain contact and a positive relationship with their children. Using overt as well as subtle means, stepfathers can act as an ally to the father (Marsiglio, in press-a). How and why men construct this role is likely to influence and be affected in complex ways by men's orientation toward claiming stepchildren as their own.

Thus, some of the stepfathers, like Eddie, construct their own understanding of "family" reality by assuming that it is fine for children to have two "fathers." Terry, for example, was open to helping his now 9-year-old stepson Zack recognize a few years ago that it was okay to have two dads—even though he despised the biological father's life style and approach to fathering. Terry, with his wife by his side, recalls telling Zack something like,

'Look, it's okay to have two dads. You have a couple sets of grandparents and whatever. It's okay to have two different fathers. I'm the one that's here with you all the time and he's the one up there. If he gets more involved in your life, then great! If he doesn't, nothing changes. I'm still here. I'm the one that's going to be here every day.' So I said 'don't be afraid to call me whatever you want to call me.'

For Terry and his wife, the notion of Zack or anyone for that matter having two dads was rather mundane because it reflected many people's everyday reality. Not all stepfathers shared this sentiment though. Some wanted a much clearer demarcation between the biological father and stepfather statuses.

By emphasizing properties such as degree of identity conviction, paternal role range, and solo-shared identity, survey and qualitative researchers can attempt to capture men's wide range of experiences with claiming children. As noted earlier, interviewers' ability to obtain valid and rich data in some instances may depend on their ability to use strategies to minimize men's presentation of a masculine self. Providing biological fathers and stepfathers opportunities to

define their relationships toward particular children in greater detail is consistent with the increasingly complex and fluid nature of men's familial relationships.

In a related vein, the varied and dynamic aspects of relationship formation and family/household structures (Cherlin, 1990) provide researchers a plethora of opportunities to study the intersection between the social demographic and social psychological aspects of men's fertility. For example, men increasingly are having children with multiple partners both within committed unions (marriage, cohabitating union, visiting unions) and outside of them. Men who have opportunities to develop co-parental roles with different women may tend to have experiences dissimilar to men who restrict their fertility and fathering events to one woman. Researchers need to consider ways to gather data that will enable them to answer the question: How do men manage their fertility decision-making and fathering when faced with this type of life course trajectory? In addition, men who forge new romantic relationships after they have fathered a child with someone else often get involved with a woman who is in the twilight of her reproductive years and/or has already given birth. The familial context for fertility decision-making in this situation may be quite different from that found among partners where neither has had a child. How do fertility and parenting experiences with previous partners (both for men and women) influence men's motivations for future fertility with their current partner? How are men's fertility intentions affected when they experience stepfatherhood first, then leave that relationship and face an opportunity to become a biological father with someone else? Framing fertility-related questions so that men can answer them directly while referencing them to their involvement in particular relationship trajectories is important.

## **Male Fertility and New Technologies**

As scholars consider ways to improve research on male fertility they should develop research strategies that recognize that new technologies are likely to influence aspects of men's lives in this domain. For example, because delayed childbearing has become more prevalent in recent decades, in part due to later ages for first marriages, high rates of relationship and marital dissolution, and strong work-related commitments (Hewlett, 2002), research questions focusing on men's perception of and involvement with assisted reproductive technologies are timely. As noted earlier, some research has explored men's experiences with assisted reproductive technologies (ART), but little is known about how men deal with noncoital forms of reproduction. Techniques dependent on donor semen are of particular interest because they potentially raise issues for men about their sense of procreative adequacy, concerns that may be related to or confounded with perceptions about sexual dysfunction. Research that generates a deeper understanding of men's individual concerns about ART as well as their interactions with their partner can provide fertility specialists and staff useful insights for assisting men and their partners cope with their stressful attempts to deal with infertility. This research will probably require recruitment strategies that target specific populations so standard national surveys may not be a suitable mechanism to collect these data. However, large-scale surveys that use a nonhousehold sampling frame and qualitative projects can contribute to a better understanding of men's concerns and reactions to the diagnosis of infertility and subsequent treatments.

To reiterate an earlier point, because DNA technologies offer a more objective means to establish paternity, they will continue to alter the social and cultural landscape for how men perceive their procreative abilities. Using survey and qualitative methodologies to explore men's

experiences with and perceptions about this technique could generate unique insights about the extent to which and how this technology has affected men's lives.

In the area of contraception, recent advances in surgical techniques for vasectomy (Waites, 1993) that improve this method's reversibility are likely to alter men's experiences as well. Typically, men and their partners have perceived vasectomy to be a permanent form of birth control. But as new technologies improve the probability of regaining fecundity, vasectomies can provide an alternative temporary birth control strategy. Readily reversible vasectomies will allow men to have sex more freely without the fear of impregnating their partner while being more confident that they can regain their procreative abilities should they choose to pursue that option with their current or future partner. Survey and qualitative researchers should therefore ask men to share their perceptions about vasectomy and their reasons for using or not using it. How does using what is perceived to be a highly effective and reversible form of contraception affect men's procreative consciousness?

### **Conclusions**

As scholars consider ways to improve the measurement and assessment of aspects of male fertility they should be mindful of the timely research questions brought about by changes in family demography and technological developments. These wide-ranging questions raise important conceptual issues implicating both social demographic and social psychological approaches. Efforts to develop a more nuanced understanding of male fertility and fatherhood will be most productive if they are guided by theoretical traditions sensitive to the interrelated life course, phenomenological, interpretive, and gendered aspects of male fertility phenomena.

When viewed collectively, the theoretical perspectives can be used to showcase how male fertility research can be connected to research on fathering and the meaning of children, both living and imaginary, in men's lives. Men's complex and multilayered procreative consciousness, as well as their orientation toward family life, provide a powerful conceptual tool to frame the study of male fertility. This approach accentuates the cognitive and contextual features associated with the choices men make reporting, describing, and interpreting their fertility experiences.

Survey researchers can experiment with strategies to capture more accurately men's diverse and potentially fluid fertility experiences and familial-like relationships. Survey questions can be crafted to develop a broader and more refined sense of men's experiences with paternity confidence, fatherhood readiness, and paternal claiming. Questions should explore various aspects of men's "knowing" (most importantly, perceptions of personal potency, degree of paternity confidence, methods for confirming paternity status) and the way fathers and stepfathers orient toward particular children in terms of their degree of identity conviction, paternal role range, and solo-shared identity. Meanwhile, contemporary qualitative researchers should be aware of the aforementioned concepts when assessing how men initially develop their identities as persons presumably capable of creating human life, then negotiate those identities once they either have children, choose not to have them, or struggle to make sense of their male-factor or couple infertility.

Ideally, future data collection efforts should incorporate multi-method strategies so that interpretive researchers will be in a position to augment demographic commentary about men's fertility histories. Conducting qualitative interviews with a subset of respondents in national surveys is one obvious way to achieve this methodological diversity. Aside from answering

standard demographic male fertility questions, survey researchers can help document the pervasiveness of men's subjective experiences while profiling what individual and family characteristics are associated with them. Clearly, theoretically informed survey and qualitative strategies can each contribute to a broader, more refined understanding of men's subjective experiences within the procreative realm.

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<sup>1</sup> Although reliable data are not available to document how many legal fathers falsely assume that they are the genetic father to a child, some commentators suggest that the proportion is rather high. R. Robin Baker, a former zoology professor at the University of Manchester, is quoted as saying, “One in 10 children don’t belong to their mother’s long-term partners, they don’t belong to their putative fathers” (McDonald, 1999, A20).