Understanding Men’s Prenatal Experience and the Father Involvement Connection: Assessing Baby Steps

Cabrera, Fagan, and Farrie’s research provides a useful springboard to encourage scholars to think broadly and productively about theoretical, substantive, methodological, and social intervention issues related to men’s prenatal experiences, transitional life course events, and subsequent engagement with their young children. To their credit, the authors have taken valuable “baby steps” on the path to building a more nuanced understanding of the conditions and processes comprising this complex matrix of phenomena. The authors make a unique contribution to the literature by using panel data to examine how three factors, defined as “life transitions” (father identity salience, fathers’ relationship quality and residential status with the child’s mother, fathers’ employment status), might mediate the link between unmarried prospective fathers’ prenatal and postnatal experiences. In the spirit of advancing a research agenda in this area, I stress the merits and limitations of the data Cabrera and her colleagues use while elaborating conceptual and methodological themes to guide future research.

ASSESSING RESEARCH CLAIMS, STRENGTHS, AND LIMITATIONS

When discussing their results, the authors boldly claim that “they are the first to explain the process by which unmarried fathers’ prenatal involvement has an effect on father engagement when the children are 1 and 3 years of age using a nationally representative sample of mostly unmarried couples.” I agree the study is novel, but I urge caution when interpreting phrases such as “explain the process” and “nationally representative sample.” Multiple, overlapping processes define men’s prenatal and postnatal experiences. Because the study is based on limited measures (especially in terms of prenatal experiences), it only begins, substantively speaking, to “explain” selective aspects of what is taking place. Thus, a more thorough conceptualization and access to more detailed measures would make it easier to assert theoretically grounded claims about unmarried fathers’ experiences. Moreover, because the Fragile Families (FF) sample for this analysis (as the authors acknowledge) is characterized by a high rate of nonresponse and attrition, as well as possible selection effects, the sample is biased toward men who are more involved in their partners’ and children’s lives.

The authors also state that “our findings suggest that early involvement with the mother and the child during the pregnancy places unmarried fathers on a positive trajectory of increased commitment to the mother and subsequent higher engagement with their infant.” Here, again, the finding is noteworthy, but caution is warranted when interpreting the statement because the data do not clearly measure fathers’ level of involvement with or orientation toward prenatal
“children” per se. Consequently, we are left to interpret the theoretical and substantive meaning of a vague measure of men’s prenatal activity. I return to assess these issues below, offering suggestions for future data collection as well. That said, had more refined measures of men’s prenatal experiences been available in FF, I suspect the general pattern of results would have prevailed, though it would have been possible to dissect more precisely whether certain aspects of prenatal involvement mattered disproportionately.

In addition, because time is relative, we should be careful interpreting the authors’ contention—preserved in the article’s title—that they are focusing on the “long reach” of men’s prenatal involvement. A panel design that follows individuals for 3 years has distinct advantages, but the truly long-term implications of men’s prenatal experiences are beyond the scope of the data used in this study. Even the researchers point out that the strength of association between the prenatal and postnatal measures is attenuated when comparing findings on the basis of the Year 1 and Year 3 data, respectively.

When studying life transitions men might experience in response to fatherhood, the authors infer that some men altered their perspective on life and family and then made reasoned decisions. This assumption should be reconciled with the notion that social life reflects a dynamic mix of human agency and structural forces. In some respects, men have considerable latitude in how they develop an identity as a father; establish and sustain a commitment with their partners as romantic partners, coparents, or both (including whether they coreside); and make individual decisions about employment and risky behaviors (e.g., drugs, others crimes). Unmarried fathers, however, are likely to encounter varied resources and obstacles that can alter their perception of and ability to follow through with a desired plan. For example, a man may be committed to developing a serious relationship with the mother of his child and he may want to forge a strong commitment to a father identity. Yet the mother may impede a romantic tie, and she can, if she wants, make it exceedingly difficult for the father of her child to be involved actively in the child’s life. The optimism some low-income men have about their options for marriage is often contradicted by the reality that many are viewed as poor marriage prospects in their partners’ eyes. If mothers are determined to minimize the fathers’ involvement with their children, men with limited human, financial, and social capital are likely to encounter bigger struggles as fathers compared to their more advantaged peers. Mothers’ decision to live with the child separate from the man can be particularly consequential.

By including measures for fathers’ age and education in their analyses, the authors can interpret the relationships between the key variables while controlling a few factors that contribute to human capital. We learn little, however, about how fathers and others perceive and manage the conditions that influence their decisionmaking. Unfortunately, because of sampling bias, the authors could not systematically assess data documenting fathers’ criminal risk-taking propensities that occurred after the men learned they were going to become fathers. Were such data available, a full accounting of unmarried fathers’ responses would still require that researchers determine whether some unemployed and low-income men actually increased their criminal activity in an effort to provide financially for their children.

Although limited by the FF data, the authors recognize the potential substantive importance of the child’s mother and include a mediating variable for the possible shift in men’s perceived relationship quality and residential status with her. Surprisingly, the relationship quality measure was not significantly related to fathers’ engagement in multivariate models. The authors also astutely speculate that even though relationship quality does not influence self-reported quantity of father involvement, it may influence the quality of father-child relationships. Clearly, triangulated measures of father-child relationship quality would be best, but assessments by fathers, mothers, or children would provide another option to expand the scope of research designed to understand possible links between men’s prenatal and postnatal experiences. The researchers do provide empirical evidence for the common sense notion that coresiding fathers are more engaged with their children than are nonresident fathers. This finding reinforces diverse initiatives designed to help fathers and mothers coreside, thereby improving fathers’ opportunities to be more involved (preferably in positive ways) with their children.

Even though this study and others suggest that some indicators of men’s prenatal involvement predict their later actions as fathers, FF data are poorly equipped to explore the social psychological complexity of men’s lives during the prenatal
or postnatal period. A dense theoretical understanding of the mechanisms linking men’s early experiences and later involvements with their children is ultimately tied to the use of high quality measures of men’s prenatal experiences. For example, compared to Bronte-Tinkew, Ryan, Carrano, and Moore’s (2007) study of resident fathers using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort data, the current study is based on a much narrower index of prenatal involvement. Recall that Cabrera and her colleagues used three indicators of prenatal involvement, relying on a composite measure in their analyses that incorporated men’s responses to all three items and women’s responses to the first two: (a) During the baby’s mothers’ pregnancy, did you give her money or buy things for the baby? (b) Did you help in other ways, like providing transportation/doing chores? (c) Were you present at the birth?

Though this three-item measure captures aspects of men’s prenatal involvement, it is decidedly incomplete. I suspect that the latter two items do little to differentiate highly motivated prospective fathers from all but the most distant men. The men also may have interpreted the first two questions quite loosely and have, for example, thought that buying one present was sufficient grounds to say, “yes,” to the first item. Unfortunately, a few measures based on dichotomous replies, even when combined, restrict both the index’s variability and its predictive value. Of course, having the mother’s reports probably enhances the measure’s reliability.

Not surprisingly, these data leave me wanting to know more about how and why men were involved prenatally to get a better sense of how and under what conditions their involvement might matter for children. We need fresh thinking to see men’s prenatal experience in a more complex, multidimensional fashion and to enhance new survey and qualitative data collection. Such efforts should focus on diverse aspects of men’s lives that connect them to partners and children: cognitive maps of self and others, affective and instrumental relationship ties, behavioral expressions—some of which are embedded in interpersonal rituals like attending childbirth classes and narrative identity constructions. Intensive qualitative research could help identify critical themes that are empirically grounded. Those involved in new survey data collection might also benefit from reviewing May’s (1980) earlier typology of men’s distinct behavioral styles during a partner’s pregnancy (observer, expressive, and instrumental) for clues to prepare more inclusive interview schedules.

To achieve greater theoretical leverage, researchers must consider how specific conditions shape men’s perceptions of their prenatal involvement, and foster or curtail their efforts. Cabrera et al.’s use of the life course and identity perspectives provides a reasonable basis for framing research questions relevant to the issues at hand, but future efforts, for starters, should more fully incorporate ideas about the process of men doing gender, the relevance of trust to couple’s decision making and coparenting, and a fuller treatment of the social psychology processes and concepts (e.g., commitment, comparative appraisals, turning points) influencing men’s expressions of their procreative and paternal identities over time (Marsiglio, 2004).

Although the available FF measures can be interpreted as a general sign of men’s efforts to be supportive of their partner, more conceptually rich measures could clarify a potentially important point. Is the support a man directs at his partner generated by the couple’s romantic bond or because the woman is the prospective mother and future coparent of the man’s unborn “child” or some equal or unequal combination of the two motives. It will be challenging to disentangle many men’s motives as partner and coparent, but meaningful differences might exist that over time alter the nature of the man/father-woman/mother relationship and father-child interaction. This type of distinction, though interesting theoretically, may have little practical value if the men’s specific motives do not influence their subsequent behavior, either as a partner, father, or coparent. In short, researchers should gather more detailed survey and qualitative evidence about men’s relationship commitments and key life transitions to substantiate inferences about why prospective fathers and new fathers behave as they do.

Finally, it is important to consider the varied ways men construct their father identities over time and how men are connected to or involved with the fetus or, perhaps in their mind, “child.” One line of questioning could explore men’s perspective about the place of fathering in their lives as well as their specific views about coparenting particular children. Although the measures are limited, Cabrera et al. use two specific items and one general item to operationalize aspects of men’s father identity. Additionally, the researchers make the most out of three crude
measures of child characteristics to account for fathers either being drawn to or pushed away from children with particular characteristics.

CONCEPTUALIZING AND CAPTURING PRENATAL EXPERIENCE: FUTURE EFFORTS

Efforts to capture a more expansive range of prenatal experience should explore options to measure men’s child visions (imagined physical and personality features of a specific child) and fathering visions (mental projections of self engaged in fathering) (Marsiglio & Hutchinson, 2002). Similarly, a question(s) about paternity certainty can be included that enables men to comment on their level of certainty that they are in fact the biological father of the child in question (Marsiglio, 2007). This is especially salient for unmarried couples. These and related questions will improve efforts to understand how men cognitively map their fetus/child, providing ideas to unravel the social psychological processes underlying fathers’ identity and behavioral experiences. Concerns about temporal order must be addressed when considering these measures because some mental and emotional activity will predate men’s possible participation in prenatal activities. In short, the task is to figure out how much of men’s procreative consciousness, father identity, and prenatal experience are connected to the nature or quality of their romantic relationship versus being shaped by men’s independent perceptions, sentiments, images, and convictions about fatherhood. Insights germane to these issues can inform programmatic initiatives to promote men’s prenatal involvement and commitment to positive fathering.

Questions adapted for survey or in-depth interviews are needed to capture more fully the breadth of men’s prenatal experiences. A sampling of these experiences can be categorized into three substantive, interconnected domains—prenatal involvement with the partner (PIP), child-focused prenatal activity (CFPA), and prospective father identity construction (PFIC):

- To what extent and how did the prospective father discuss his partner’s pregnancy experience with her? [PIP]
- To what extent did the prospective father discuss breast-feeding, including its benefits for child health, with his partner? [CFPA, PIP]
- What proportion of the prenatal doctor’s visits did the prospective father attend? [PIP, CFPA]
- To what extent did the prospective father participate in childbirth preparation classes (general, breast-feeding, car safety, infant care, etc.)? [PIP, CFPA]
- To what extent did the prospective father help pay for the prenatal doctor’s visits? [PIP, CFPA]
- Did the prospective father view a fetal sonogram or four-dimensional image? If so, what was his reaction? [CFPA, PIP]
- Did the prospective father hear the baby’s heart beat? If so, what was his reaction? [CFPA, PIP]
- To what extent did the prospective father have a chance to feel the baby’s movements during pregnancy? If so, what was his reaction? [CFPA, PIP]
- To what extent did the prospective father talk/sing to the baby? [CFPA, PIP]
- Did the prospective father participate in a baby shower? [PIP]
- How involved was the prospective father in choosing a name for the child? [CFPA, PIP]
- To what extent did the prospective father spend money on items for the baby prior to the child’s birth? [CFPA]
- To what extent during the prenatal period did the prospective father discuss the baby with persons other than his partner? [CFPA, PFIC]
- To what extent did the prospective father want others to know about his impending paternity? [PFIC, CFPA]
- To what extent did the prospective father read literature about pregnancy, child development, and fathering? [CFPA, PFIC]
- Prior to the birth, how often and what types of images did the prospective father have of his baby? Was the gender known, and if so, how did this influence the images? [CFPA]
- Prior to the birth, how often did the prospective father have images of interacting with his child and what type of images were these? [CFPA]
- To what extent and how did the father participate in his partner’s labor and the child’s birth? [PIP, CFPA]

Developing measures that assess both visual and touch-based modes of knowledge acquisition about prenatal babies may enhance understanding of fathers’ attachment patterns (Draper, 2002). Unfortunately, because survey researchers are often forced to measure a vital concept with relatively few items, it will be challenging, perhaps prohibitively expensive, to field a large national
survey with an extensive battery of items covering all the issues noted above.

Despite Cabrera et al.’s conscientious efforts to control for potentially confounding factors, I still wonder if the prenatal involvement measure’s statistically significant relationship to father-child engagement is masking the importance of other attributes or experiences common to unmarried fathers who are at least superficially involved prenatally. Perhaps, too, some unspecified dimension of prenatal involvement, as measured by the FF items, substantially influences men’s relationships with their partners and engagement with their children.

DEVELOPING NEW RESEARCH FOCI AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

As researchers incorporate the concepts alluded to above into their studies they should also develop strategies to assess the nature of how men’s involvement materialized. Did men assertively initiate or demand to be included, or both? Were they gently encouraged or pressured into being involved? How was their involvement negotiated? Were they influenced by programmatic initiatives? Although obtaining this depth of information from fathers is easier in the course of a qualitative study, survey-based questions can generate meaningful responses too.

In addition, future research should consider how masculinity ideologies, and gendered practices that define pregnancy and reproduction as primarily women’s issues, might influence men’s prenatal involvement and their engagement with young children. Viewing unmarried men’s lives in context necessitates taking into account how the production of masculine capital is affected by the intersection of social class, race or ethnicity, and age considerations.

I agree with the authors that researchers need to study more closely mechanisms that reinforce the stability of social support and meaningful partner and parenting relationships. Specifically, more attention needs to focus on a key concept—trust. Trust is relevant to all relationships, but it may play a decisive role in the complex story of low-income fathers. Thus, when studying fathers of infant children in particular, research needs to explore the following:

- What conditions foster women’s willingness to trust that their partners will make good long-term partners and coparents?
- What conditions enable men to trust themselves as fathers and value their possible contribution to their children’s lives?

Researchers should explore the processes of managing trust so as to expand upon Cabrera et al.’s push to highlight the significance of coresidency. A more nuanced story will explain how the process of building and negotiating trust influences the connection between men’s prenatal experience and couples’ living together decisions.

We must commit ourselves to study and develop interventions that cover the full, complex matrix of men’s experiences and related conditions if we want to develop social policy and programmatic initiatives that help low-income fathers and others grapple with difficult family circumstances and transitions. Paying attention to the matrix involves understanding the ways other males (e.g., family, friends, coworkers, neighbors) might potentially influence prospective fathers to assume a more or less active role in developing their sense of readiness for fatherhood. As I’ve argued elsewhere, getting men to move beyond their conditional commitments to establish direct attachments to their child should be a policy and programmatic goal (Marsiglio, 1995). Another angle is to encourage researchers to assess what else is going on in terms of the father’s larger social life, especially multiple-partner fathering (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006; Manlove, Logan, Ikramullah, & Holcombe, 2008). Interestingly, in all their models for father engagement in Year 3, Cabrera et al. incorporated a measure identifying those men who had had another child between the second and third interviews by a woman other than the mother of the target child. The analyses tell us that the timing of this multiple-partner fertility was related to a lower level of engagement, but it appears that the models are not designed to show whether this variable influenced the relationship between prenatal involvement and engagement.

Observers should recognize that the reasons couples do not marry (economic need and poor job prospects) are often different than the reasons why they do not stay together or why they coparent poorly (England & Edin, 2007). Efforts to promote both economic prospects and relationship skills are critical to helping low-income men be more productive or remain engaged fathers. Obviously, any strategy designed to help couples live together will face a mixed response
because living together can minimize some conflicts while exacerbating others.

Clearly, much more needs to done, but Cabrera et al.’s study highlights critical issues that move us a bit closer to apprehending the complex processes linking men’s prenatal experiences with their interactions with infant children. At minimum, these processes deserve careful study because they have theoretical and practical implications for understanding and enhancing fragile families, child development, and gender equity.

REFERENCES


