Young Men’s Procreative Identity: Becoming Aware, Being Aware, and Being Responsible

Using a purposive sample of 37 single men aged 16 to 30, in-depth face-to-face interviews, and a grounded theory approach, we explore males’ subjective experiences as procreative beings. Our study is informed by symbolic interactionism and 2 sensitizing concepts: procreative consciousness and procreative responsibility. We focus on how males become aware of their perceived fecundity, experience themselves as procreative beings once they become aware, and view responsibility while orienting themselves toward their sexual and potential paternal roles. Our analyses deepen, expand, integrate, and ground in empirical data notions about procreative consciousness and men’s experiences. We find that males use varied interpretive foci to assign meaning to discovering their procreative potential. Furthermore, we show how romantic partners help males co-construct their procreative consciousness, in part by helping men actively attend to issues of procreative responsibility. Consistent with our grounded theory approach, we discuss 5 new dimensions to procreative consciousness suggested by our data:

fecundity perception, emotional response, knowledge, temporality, and child visions.

In recent years, males increasingly have been the focus of research (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998; Grady, Klepinger, Billy, & Tanfer, 1996; Marsiglio, 1998; Marsiglio, Hutchinson, and Cohan, 2000) and programmatic initiatives (Moore, Driscoll, & Ooms, 1997; Sonenstein, Stewart, Lindberg, Pernas, & Williams, 1997) related to sexuality, contraception, pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting. Scholars, policymakers, and social service providers have also begun to define responsible fatherhood more broadly to include males’ conscientious involvement in sexual and contraceptive decision making to prevent unplanned pregnancies (Levine & Pitt, 1995; Marsiglio, 1993). These and other developments have situated males more squarely in the mix of important policy debates about sex, pregnancy, paternity, and social fatherhood.

Although recent research has advanced our understanding of young men’s involvement in the sexual, procreative, and fatherhood arenas, we still know little about the social psychology of young men’s self-perceptions and behaviors as evolving procreative beings. In particular, little is known about the processes by which males become aware of their potential to procreate and then either weave that knowledge into their ongoing construction and presentation of self, particularly in relation to their romantic partners, or minimize the impact of that knowledge on their sense of self.
In addition, little research focuses on the potentially complex ways in which men’s seemingly separate experiences in the procreative realm affect one another over the course of men’s sexual and procreative careers.

Much can be gained theoretically by expanding our understanding of the social psychology of how young single men become aware of their fecundity and then negotiate the terrain of sex, contraception, pregnancy, abortion, and fatherhood. This type of theoretical grounding of males’ experiences is critical to the study of both unintended pregnancy and childbearing among young persons who may be ill-prepared to face the demands of full-time parenting. We organize our exploratory analysis of young men’s lives as procreative beings around the sensitizing concept of procreative consciousness and, to a lesser extent, around the related concept of procreative responsibility. On a substantive level, we explore men’s consciousness of their procreative ability by addressing three broad questions: How do young men: (a) become aware of themselves as persons capable of impregnating a sex partner; (b) experience themselves as procreative beings; and (c) view responsibility issues and orient themselves toward their sexual and potential paternal roles? Consistent with the tenets of grounded theory, we then move to a more abstract level and discuss a new set of dimensions relevant to procreative consciousness that emerged from our data analysis. Throughout our analysis and discussion, we also explore the relationship between men’s procreative thoughts and their behaviors.

BACKGROUND

Theoretical Sensitizing Concepts

Unlike many studies based on a grounded theory approach, we initiated our study with considerable familiarity with the theoretical terrain, as well as with knowledge of substantive issues—trends relating to sex, contraceptive use, abortion, procreation, and fatherhood—that are likely to function as “social facts” (Durkheim, 1895/1982) and to influence men’s procreative identities. We have drawn selectively from the first author’s framework for conceptualizing the multifaceted aspects of men’s lives as procreative beings (Marsiglio, 1998). This social psychological scheme hinges on two interrelated sensitizing concepts (van den Hoonoord, 1997), procreative consciousness and procreative responsibility, and it emphasizes their connection to men’s overlapping identities as sexual partners, fathers, and masculine men. Although this general framework punctuates how men’s and women’s reproductive experiences are differentiated as a result of social, cultural, and physiological factors, systematic gender comparisons are beyond the scope of how we use the two sensitizing concepts in our current analysis.

Procreative consciousness. Procreative consciousness refers to men’s attitudes, feelings, and impressions of themselves as these factors pertain to various aspects of procreation—including men’s image of themselves as prospective fathers. We focus primarily on procreative consciousness as part of men’s “wide-awake” consciousness, although men might have different fertility-related motivations (Miller, 1992) that are not prominent features of their immediate lived experience, being neither influences on men’s behavior nor expressed as part of men’s “wide-awake” consciousness. These motivations, residing in men’s latent procreative consciousness, can be viewed as untapped potential that can be activated under the appropriate circumstances.

Men’s procreative consciousness has both fleeting and more enduring aspects. The phrase situational procreative consciousness refers to those relatively short-lived occasions when men actively attend (though sometimes superficially) to procreative issues during a specific activity. On such occasions, men are likely to be involved with objects or props (e.g., condoms, pregnancy prevention advertisements, pamphlets discussing fatherhood) or people (e.g., sexual partners, clinic staff, friends, parents) in a specific type of situation (e.g., sexual encounter, discussion about contraception or pregnancy, consumer purchase).

Men are also likely to be influenced by a relatively stable, albeit frequently muddled and obscure, collection of thoughts and feelings that represent their more general views of themselves as procreative beings. The term global procreative consciousness is useful here. Although this type of awareness might manifest in numerous ways, it is probably most distinct during prolonged and identifiable phases of men’s lives and is likely to be affected by their previous experiences with contraception, abortion, pregnancy, and childbirth. An identifiable period might include, say, the span between the time when a man’s partner informs him that her period is late and the time when she announces that her period has arrived.

Another noteworthy distinction can be made
by considering the basis for men’s procreative consciousness, as it is expressed in either the situated or global context. On the one hand, men can develop relationship-based perceptions and feelings about specific domains of procreation. In this context, men’s procreative consciousness and sense of responsibility can be influenced by specific features of a romantic relationship and by a partner’s views about reproductive issues. On the other hand, men might have personal beliefs, attitudes, and preferences about individual procreative issues that are not confined to or necessarily the result of their ongoing involvement in a particular romantic relationship. Men’s ideas and feelings about procreative issues might be relatively stable for extended periods of time. Irrespective of a particular romantic relationship, men might have strong pro-life views or be inclined to view contraception as always being a shared responsibility between sexual partners.

We focus on procreative responsibility, with its important social policy implications, as a unique manifestation of procreative consciousness. The term refers both to men’s beliefs about their obligations and to their involvement in various areas such as sexual decision making, contraception and conception, discussions about how a pregnancy should be resolved, childbearing activities or rituals, and, to some extent, paternal activities (although this last area can be labeled more precisely as paternal responsibility).

Procreative responsibility encompasses two closely related, yet conceptually distinct, areas of activity involving men’s perceptions and their interactions with others. These domains include: (a) men’s perceived level of obligation to acknowledge paternity and fulfill their social fatherhood roles, and (b) the practical aspects of events related to procreation (including its prevention), ranging from sex to contraception to conception to gestation to pregnancy outcome (e.g., choosing a contraceptive method, accompanying a partner for an abortion). Defining male procreative responsibility precisely is problematic because diverse and sometimes contradictory definitions of responsibility will exist on individual, familial, peer group, community, and societal levels. We favor men’s subjective definitions of responsibility in our analysis. Moreover, men’s behavior often occurs within an ongoing interpersonal relationship and is therefore not easily identified as one distinct action.

Self and identity. Our interviewing and analytic strategies have also been influenced by the basic tenets of symbolic interactionism insofar as we have conceptualized procreative consciousness as both a dynamic process and a socially constructed product that is related to formulations of identity and self (Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1980). As a result, we have emphasized the social processes by which young men assign meaning to situations, events, acts, others, and themselves as they encounter aspects of the procreative realm, particularly their presumed ability to engender human life. This perspective allows us to explore the means by which young men develop and manage their procreative consciousness and sense of responsibility. We have considered participants’ accounts of how their views and experiences have evolved in the context of their interactions with others, most notably, their current and previous sexual partners. By searching for evidence that specifically reveals fleeting as well as more enduring and active features to men’s procreative consciousness, we can inform efforts to understand the context within which men develop situated or relatively stable self-images as procreative beings that, in turn, influence their dating, sexual behavior, fertility attitudes, and negotiation and use of birth control methods.

Previous Research

Issues related to procreative consciousness. Survey data relevant to our first question, about males’ initial awareness of their presumed fecundity, is largely indirect, cursory, or nonexistent. Because we know that a large percentage of men (married men in particular) report using condoms to prevent pregnancies rather than STDs, we can assume that these men have given some thought to their presumed fecundity (Ku, Sonenstein, & Pleck, 1994; Tanfer et al., 1993). Although findings from focus group work (Sugland, Wilder, & Chandra, 1997) are consistent with this inference, both young females and young males tend to assert that males think less about pregnancy prior to having sex than do females. Meanwhile, national survey data indicate that 92% of 17- to 25-year-old men in the 1982 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) and 89% of 15- to 19-year-old men in the 1988 National Survey of Adolescent Males-1 (NSAM-1) report that they expected to father a child (for a review, see Marsiglio, 1998). We also know that a small, though not inconsequential, proportion of young 15- to 19-year-old
males report that fathering a child would make them feel like a "real man" (Marsiglio, 1993).

Sullivan's (1995) ethnographic study of teenage and young adult men in Brooklyn, New York, touches upon the consciousness or awareness theme of interest to us. This study reveals that some respondents felt they were too young and not sufficiently mature to impregnate their partner. Some spoke of their ejaculate as ‘dog water,’ or they mentioned that they were ‘shooting blanks,’ although the majority were aware that sex could lead to pregnancy. Many also seemed to adopt a fatalist approach to the prospects of paternity, which Sullivan posited was probably due to their exposure to either a lower-class or working-class cultural ethos. Relatedly, research with the initial wave of NSAM finds some support for the idea that young men living in poor neighborhoods, not controlling for city size, would be less upset and would anticipate greater rewards from becoming a father than would youth living in more affluent places (Marsiglio, 1993). Young men from disadvantaged environments might view paternity as a source of prestige, especially if they do not have long-term educational and employment goals.

Recent focus group research (Gilmore, Delamater, & Wagstaff, 1996; Sugland et al., 1997) and earlier interviews with abortion veterans (Shostak, McLouth, & Seng, 1984) highlight issues related to the interpersonal context that shapes young men’s views and behavior in terms of fertility-related matters. This research is relevant to our second question, about men’s experiences as procreative beings. Some African American young men, for instance, speak of their concerns about not being able to trust all of their sexual partners to use effective contraception. At the other end of the spectrum, some African American young men report that they know of male peers who want to get their partners pregnant to secure their hold over them.

Issues related to procreative responsibility. Some data speak to our third question, regarding young males’ contraceptive use, views about responsibility, and pregnancy resolution choices. Data from the NSAM show that, after young men learn they have impregnated a partner, they are more likely to report higher levels of sexual intercourse and lower levels of condom use with partners in general (Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1996). Pleck and his colleagues speculate that these young men might be more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior because they have perceived few negative consequences associated with their previous pregnancy experience, and this experience might have made them feel more masculine while also generating support from their male peer group.

Analyses with the NSAM indicate that a relatively large percentage of young men report that they have what many would define as a responsible orientation toward sex and contraceptive issues (Marsiglio, 1993). Small-scale studies have also shown that some young fathers are interested in and committed to being actively and positively involved with their children (Allen & Doherty, 1996; see Kiselica, 1995). At the same time, recent analyses using a national cross-section of adults indicate that both men and women report that women tend to anticipate greater personal responsibility for children they bear than do men (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1997).

Many young men clearly feel that prospective fathers should have a stake in making decisions about how a pregnancy is resolved. In one study using the NSAM, 61% of adolescent males reported that they did not feel it would be all right for a woman to have an abortion if her partner objects, indicating a possible gender conflict of interest over the abortion issue (Marsiglio & Shehan, 1993).

As this brief review suggests, research that delves into young men’s dynamic and complex subjective experiences as sexual and procreative beings is clearly warranted to supplement the burgeoning survey data used to document sexual and contraceptive patterns among males. Our research, which focuses on both intrapsychic and interpersonal processes as well as on dimensions of procreative consciousness, can enrich our understanding of young men’s diverse and interrelated experiences in the procreative realm while also stimulating new avenues for both survey and qualitative research.

Method
As mentioned earlier, we use procreative consciousness and procreative responsibility as sensitizing concepts to provide us with a way to guide our construction of our initial interview questions. In keeping with the grounded theory method (Glaser, 1978, 1992), we rely on open-ended, in-depth, formal interviews designed to elicit young men’s descriptions of their experiences as procreative beings. We then examine the narrative data in order to understand more fully the concepts of procreative consciousness and responsibility, to generate new related theoretical ideas, and to integrate
the new concepts with each other and with the theoretical aspects of procreative consciousness and responsibility. In short, we use a grounded theory approach to capture the range and complexity of the theoretical terrain, rather than trying to document attitudinal and behavioral patterns or to inventory the types of participants who are most apt to express their procreative consciousness in a certain way.

Sample

For this research we rely on audiotaped interviews with 37 single men between the ages of 16 and 30 who had dated at least one woman (or had been married) in the past 3 years.

We maximized the diversity of our participants through our purposive sampling strategy. We recruited participants in a number of ways. Screening interviewers arranged 16 interviews with men who were visiting a local Department of Motor Vehicles’ office, and we identified the remaining participants through abortion clinics, a prenatal clinic, a prepared childbirth class, a local employment agency, a homeless shelter, personal contacts, and word of mouth.

Through our selective site sampling and screening interviews, we accounted for men’s diverse procreative life experiences as well as for their age, race or ethnicity, education, financial status, and relationship status. Among our participants, 17 (ages 16–30) indicated that they had no pregnancy or fertility experiences, 11 (ages 18–28) had partners who had aborted a pregnancy (typically within the previous 12 months), 6 (ages 20–28) were involved with partners currently pregnant with their child, 3 (ages 22–29) had had partners who had experienced a miscarriage, and 5 (ages 20–29) had biological children prior to the interview. As these numbers indicate, 5 participants had more than one fertility experience. Two men with biological children reported having had a partner who aborted a pregnancy, 2 others had partners who had miscarriages. One man with a pregnant partner had previously been with a partner who experienced an abortion. We also conducted follow-up interviews 1 to 2 months postpartum with 2 of the men who had pregnant partners; we therefore conducted a total of 39 interviews. We constructed our sample to include men with different fertility experiences so as to broaden the range of data available for our analyses, rather than as a basis for examining differences and commonalities among participants with different procreative profiles.

The racial or ethnic composition of our sample is: 22 White, 11 African American (one biracial), 2 Hispanic, and 2 Native American men. The mean age of the sample is 21.3, with 7 men being younger than 19 and 10 others being 26 or older. Three of our participants were still in high school, another 8 had no college experience, 23 had some college experience (1 of these men had not completed high school), and 1 was a college graduate. Nine participants explicitly labeled themselves as “poor” and 1 “nearly poor” when we asked them: “Please describe your own money situation?” Five participants were divorced and 1 was separated (“nearly divorced”). All participants lived in north central ($n = 32$) or northeast ($n = 5$) Florida, including both urban and rural areas.

We use pseudonyms throughout the text to refer to all respondents, and we abbreviate quoted excerpts to eliminate redundancies (e.g., “then, then I knew”) and extraneous utterances (e.g., “you know,” “um”).

Interviews

Our semistructured, audiotaped, face-to-face interviews lasted between 60–90 minutes and took place in on-campus offices, public libraries, and other locations convenient to the participants. Four interviewers—2 White males, an African American male, and a White female, ages 30, 40, 45, and 55, respectively—conducted the interviews.

With an eye toward the past, present, and future, we encouraged our participants to talk about their perceptions and experiences involving relationships, sex, contraception, pregnancy, abortion, and fatherhood. We focused extensively on their current relationship if they had one. Based on previous research (Landry & Camelo, 1994; Sullivan, 1995), we assume that our sample is at least vaguely aware of the link between sex and pregnancy. We therefore asked when and how men first started thinking of themselves as someone capable of impregnating a partner, and we asked how they see themselves now. In addition, we asked men to talk about their thoughts, feelings, and behavior in different types of relationships and situations specifically relevant to their experiences (e.g., casual dating, serious relationship, pregnancy scare, pregnancy resolution process). Finally, we explored the extent to which men discussed the relevant issues with partners,
friends, family members, and health care professionals.

While interviewing, we were aware that interviewees could respond to our sensitive and sometimes personal questions with idealized responses, telling us what they thought we wanted to hear. To minimize socially desirable answers, we attempted to display a nonjudgmental attitude while emphasizing the importance and value of their feelings, beliefs, and experiences for our understanding. Although we did not attempt to verify independently the truth of participants’ claims (e.g., through birth records), all responses seemed credible to the four interviewers. Participants typically reported feeling comfortable talking about these personal aspects of their lives and said they enjoyed the interview. This finding is consistent with those of Hutchinson, Wilson & Wilson (1994), who described varying benefits reported by interview participants.

Sensitivity to temporal issues implicit in our interview questions is also important. We asked the young men to present multiple temporal notions of themselves, to move back and forth in the narrative among their past, present, and future selves. However, we tried to avoid leading interviewees to “come up” with answers to questions that were really beyond their experience or their own prior thinking. In our interviews generally, and in this paper, we emphasize participants’ experiences with those subjects they have attended to previously or are attending to at present.

**Data Analysis**

We subjected our data to the methods of grounded theory analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), including substantive and theoretical coding, memoing (the writing of theoretical notes), and theoretical sampling. The constant comparative method facilitated the comparisons of incident with incident and incidents with the developing codes. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously, permitting the data analysis to inform data collection by suggesting the importance of a particular code or the need to obtain more data on a particular code. Memoing helped in identifying relationships among codes. As a technique to enhance dependability, the first two authors of this paper coded each interview separately and then together (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**RESULTS**

**Becoming Aware**

An important, though largely unexplored, area of young men’s experiences as procreative beings is the shift or transformation of consciousness they experience when they become aware that, as a male, they presumably can impregnate a sex partner. We explore this by focusing on two features of “becoming aware”: (a) the nature of young men’s “knowing,” and (b) how their awareness might change or evolve over time. Throughout our discussion, we attend not only to how the men come to recognize their procreative potential (becoming aware), but also to what that potential means in terms of their thoughts and feelings (being aware), and their behavior (being responsible).

Young men talk about their initial awareness and understanding of their ability to procreate, providing us with a window into their intrapsychic lives as adolescents and young adults. Some participants report becoming aware of their fecundity as early as 10 years of age, with most reporting that they experienced an initial shift in their procreative consciousness between their early and middle teen years (13–15). In some instances, participants talk about additional changes during their late teens and 20s, including a greater sense of clarity about their procreative potential and responsibilities.

“Knowing”: meaning and emotions. Participants vary considerably in the way they initially experience their understanding of their fecundity. In other words, “knowing” means different things for different participants. For some, awareness about their fecundity represents a significant developmental and personal experience. These males see it as a sobering transformation of consciousness and self, a realization that is, on occasion, intimately tied to their understanding of how their procreative ability—in essence their ability to bring about an unplanned paternity—could have a profound impact on their life course. This sentiment is aptly captured by the comments provided by two White procreative novices when we asked them how they initially thought and felt about their newly discovered procreative capacity. Note how, without prompting, Alex and Cecil link their presumed procreative ability to paternity and the impact they believe it would have (or would have had) on their lives.

Alex (age 18): Kind of scary and overwhelming.
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Just 'cause it’s a really big deal, you know. And, never really thought about it before that. It’s just, I don’t know, it just kind of opened my eyes a little bit.

I: What did you see when you, when your eyes were opened?
Alex: Just real life. ’Bout how it could actually happen. And how much that could change things or mess things up and make it so you’re not going to be able to do what you hope to do.

Cecil (age 26): I mean, I just thought it would be a crushing responsibility, right, to have to take care of a kid when you were 16 and a lot of freedoms would, just you know go away, you know.

For those with experiences similar to these, developing this type of expanded understanding of self can be instrumental in moving young men along a developmental trajectory of sorts, one that helps them make the transition from an adolescent to an adult identity.

However, the new-found potential to impregnate a woman typically does not induce a monumental shift in young men’s sense of self. In some cases, the urge to have sex might actually restrict young men’s willingness to think seriously about their procreative ability. Note that Cecil, now 26, associates the possibility of an unplanned pregnancy in his teenage years with “crushing responsibility” and a loss of freedom. He remembers, however, that as an adolescent his desire to have sex kept the possibility of pregnancy remote in his mind, a tendency that he believes is common among young males who crave their first sexual experiences.

...[W]hen you’re young, you wanna have sex so bad when you’re like a 15-year old and 13-year old ... you don’t necessarily think that you’re gonna get somebody pregnant.

Change over time: evolutions in awareness and identity. Reflections such as Cecil’s underscore the importance of understanding the diverse ways in which young men, over time, acquire, interpret, modify, and incorporate into their sense of self and identity not only information about sex and procreation, but also their perceptions about the consequences associated with fatherhood. Reynaldo, a 17-year-old Latino participant, offers a glimpse of how a young man’s procreative self, including his sense of responsibility, might evolve over time:

Well, at first it was like, well it [procreation] can’t happen to me I’m just, you know, too good. . . . I started seeing the reality of things on TV. . . . Talk shows and like. Those shows . . . [about] teenagers that are pregnant. . . . I guess it settles in and when I was like 15 and one of my friends got pregnant and she decided to keep the baby. She had to . . . get out of school for awhile . . . ’cause she had to get a job and her parents weren’t really too happy with it. And that’s pretty much when I started seeing the truth. Like first, it’s just like oh having a baby is good, but when you think about it, it’s too much responsibility. I’m going to wait until I’m older.

For some young men, initially learning about their ability to procreate is largely an insignificant moment in how they experience themselves. Warren, a 23-year-old African American, recalls his nonchalant reaction during a sex education class:

I was thinking ‘oh I can get somebody pregnant now’ okay . . . . It didn’t really have any, I guess impact, on my life . . . . I was thinking that every other guy in that class could do the same thing, so I really didn’t see how it separated me from them.

Similarly, Desmond, another African American man, aged 30, made sense of his new-found knowledge by comparing his circumstances to his peers. He elaborates on his perceptions by saying, “I could not feel any power, ah, at the time, because, ah, it was something natural. All guys did it; so I was no more special than anyone else.” Desmond conveys the idea that knowledge of his fecundity did not have a transformative impact on his self-perception. His interpretive focus seems to be tied to a comparative appraisal with his peers rather than to his own development. He apparently did not actively attend to his own developmental changes, because he was aware that everyone else was experiencing similar physical developmental changes; and, in some cases—as he mentions elsewhere during the interview—he was aware that they were actually being confronted with consequences associated with unplanned pregnancies and births.

For some men, meaningful appreciation for their fecundity requires them to develop an experiential connection to it. In the next excerpt, Jeffrey, a White 21-year-old, contrasts his relative lack of procreative consciousness as a virgin (spoken in the present tense) with the awareness he developed in response to the first time he had intercourse:

...[T]hey say you can get a girl pregnant if you
do this [have sex]. Well, I’ve never done it [had sex]. It sounds kind of abstract to me until I’m actually faced with it. So I think when, I think the first time I had sex I was like this, and I guess I learned what it means to ejaculate, that God, this really could do something. . . . I think when you’re there in person and you physically feel it that you have the potential to do that.

Although Jeffrey points to his first experience with ejaculation during vaginal intercourse as a turning point in his perception of his procreative identity, other men’s procreative consciousness is not affected in any significant way by their sexual experiences; rather, their heightened consciousness is accomplished in connection with their first pregnancy scare or actual fertility experience. Responding to a question about when he came to realize that he was capable of “making” a child, Harper, a 29-year-old African American, replies, “I was just doing my thing, then, you know. I never really thought about fatherhood or having kids.” Later on in the interview, Harper adds, “I always knew you could, okay, you know, I could get a girl pregnant but when you are at that point when you are going to have sex I never thought about it, you know.” Having revealed his youthful efforts to downplay or dismiss his thoughts about his own fecundity, Harper acknowledges that he had never recognized how serious it was to impregnate someone until he and his partner had a pregnancy scare. It was only then, when he was faced with the prospect of becoming a father, that he developed a deeper sense of what it could mean to be a procreative man.

These data relating to the emergence of young men’s procreative consciousness reveal the richness and variability of their experiences. Because many young men are unlikely to have first-hand experience with paternity, some might be limited in their ability to identify with this seemingly irrelevant or remote life experience—especially those who are neither sexually active nor currently involved in a physical, romantic relationship. From a practical standpoint, being sexually active, particularly when vaginal intercourse is occurring, draws men closer to the procreative realm, literally and figuratively, and enables some to perceive paternity in a more realistic light. In addition, spending time with friends who share ideas and stories related to their own experiences can make procreative experiences more concrete for individuals who have a weak or nonexistent procreative consciousness. Listen to Harper describe his friend’s admonishment:

Harper: Oh yeah, [he] became a father. He was telling me, “Oh you gonna have to start doing this and doing that.” I’m like, “Man, I ain’t gonna have no kid.” He talked alot about changing diapers, you have to get up, you have to save money, buy diapers, you have to, the baby’s crying at night, you gettin’ up or you have to take it to the babysitter. . . .

I: . . . Did that get you to think about being a father and what that meant?
Harper: Ummm. It, yeah, it did actually. It did make me start thinking about a lot of things.
About things I hadn’t been thinking about. . . .

Being Aware and Being Responsible

Once young men become aware of their presumed ability to procreate, they can experience this knowledge in a variety of ways. As mentioned earlier, men’s experiences and perceptions related to the procreative realm encompass both situational as well as more enduring or global features. Moreover, men’s self-perceptions and actions in the procreative realm are often shaped by their involvement with romantic partners who can play a pivotal role in co-constructing men’s experiences in this area.

Global and situational procreative consciousness. Being knowledgeable on some level about his own procreative potential might or might not lead a man to an active self-awareness and sense of responsibility about his fecundity on a regular basis or in connection with specific events. Raymond, a 19-year-old African American, provides us with an instructive example in this regard. He summarizes his latent procreative consciousness this way: “Well, I mean, I know it can happen to me. I just don’t think about it. I mean, if I already know it, then there’s no need to really think about it.” Taken by itself, Raymond’s comment is likely to lead to the mistaken conclusion that he is largely or completely inattentive to his potential role in preventing a pregnancy. On the contrary, although his partner has been taking the pill for a while, Raymond indicates that he doesn’t “come inside of her” because it’s a “bigger risk.” He mentions that when they had sex together for the first time, he practiced withdrawal [a method he learned from the movies] without seeking approval from his partner. Raymond explains his reasoning for practicing two forms of birth control:

Raymond: . . . in one drop of sperm you got like millions of you know, even though she’s on the pill, I mean, it’s still not a hundred percent. And
Raymond’s initial explanation, his comments earlier in the interview, and his reply to the interviewer’s question all illustrate that he is quite cognizant and concerned about preventing a pregnancy. However, we learn even more about Raymond’s procreative consciousness and responsibility when we ask Raymond if he thinks about pregnancy when he withdraws, and he replies: “It’s second nature, I guess, not to, to go ahead and withdraw.” This response, taken in light of Raymond’s previous comments, demonstrates the multilayered nature of procreative consciousness. It appears that Raymond has a global self-awareness of his ability to procreate. However, he no longer actively thinks about his procreative ability during intercourse with his current partner, because withdrawal has become habitual for him, and his partner does not question him about it.

Although for some men, like Raymond, knowledge about procreative abilities might remain latent for extended periods, other men might experience this knowledge as a more active feature of their “wide-awake” self as they navigate the terrain of their everyday world. Some men appear to link their awareness to specific situations, whereas others harbor a more global type of awareness. For example, Harper demonstrates a highly active procreative consciousness, as illustrated by his reply to a question about how often he thinks about his ability to get women pregnant: “Every time I have sex, every time I think about it, like, a lot . . . if she’s not on birth control or I don’t have a condom then I’ll probably like no—you know.” Desmond, on the other hand, offers a less situation-dependent assessment of his procreative consciousness by noting how he believes that, compared to when he was a teenager, the “stakes are higher now” and he’ll “be held accountable” for his actions. He observes that, “. . . now I feel like I do have somewhat of a, I’m not going to call it a lethal weapon, but I have this potency that can really, ah, change the course of anyone’s life. Now I clearly understand it.”

Activating and deactivating procreative consciousness or responsibility. Unplanned pregnancy serves as an impetus for shaping some young men’s thoughts about their procreative potential and sense of responsibility. For instance, Warren recalls the occasional talks he has had with his partner, who asked him what he would want her to do if she got pregnant. He also lamented the fact that her “obsessive” worrying about pregnancy led him to have his own fears:

...[E]ven though I know there’s pretty much nothing to worry about, she’ll obsess about it, but she’ll try not to tell me and it’s like I know when something’s wrong with her, so then that’s when I start to think . . . so what if she is pregnant, what are you going to do? . . . [T]his job at the library can barely support you and the dust bunnies under your bed. And that’s when I start seriously thinking O.K. I’d have to drop out of school, I’d have to get a full time job, probably won’t be able to come back to school for a while, if ever.

Warren’s comments highlight the social malleability of procreative consciousness. In this instance, his situational procreative consciousness is a collaborative accomplishment between him and his partner. Left to his own devices, Warren might not actively attend to his procreative potential. But his partner’s worries prompt him to think about it and subsequently to articulate some of his perceptions about procreative responsibility.

Meanwhile, some men’s procreative consciousness is dampened by relationship experiences that lead them to ponder and reevaluate their fecundity. These experiences, which occur over time, also influence men’s sense of procreative responsibility. Two working-class divorced White men, for example, begin to question their fecundity after their former wives fail to become pregnant during extended periods of unprotected intercourse. One of these men, Jake, a 27-year-old, confides:

...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 uhh, you got to ask the question you know.

These doubts remained with Jake after his divorce when he ventured into a cohabiting relationship with a new partner. This new partner also played a role in shaping the way Jake subsequently thought about his procreative difficulties:

And it was a couple of months even after we went unprotected that she got pregnant. You know then it got real easy not to wrap up [use condoms] or whatever, you know so it got to a point where we weren’t thinking one way or an-
other. You know at the point that she got preg-
nant she was like “maybe you need to go to a
doctor and get checked out . . .” I was embar-
rassed 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.

In this instance, Jake’s and his partner’s doubts
about his fecundity move them to deemphasize
procreative responsibility. Once they begin to
think of Jake as potentially sterile, they begin to
act as if he were.

_Procreative Consciousness Dimensions_

Informed by our substantive analyses, we now
discuss a preliminary set of interrelated dimen-
sions to procreative consciousness that we gen-
erated from the data. These dimensions include-
fecundity perception, emotional responses (type
and intensity), knowledge (breadth, depth; direct,
direct, indirect), temporality (duration and frequency
of episodes), and child visions. By definition, fecun-
dity perception represents the core dimension to
procreative consciousness, because this type of
consciousness is impossible without an under-
standing of the link between sexual intercourse
and conception. Men’s thoughts in this area can
also include their assessment of their sperm’s vi-
ability. As Jake’s earlier comments suggest, he ini-
tially assumed that he was fertile, altered his per-
ceptions about his fecundity after attempting
unsuccessfully to impregnate his partners, and
then developed a more definitive perception of
himself as fertile when he impregnated his current
partner. Although most men, in response to one of
our standard questions, report that they did not
think about their sperm in any particular way, they
typically say that it is very important to be able
to sire their own children. A few participants do
have unusual perceptions of their sperm, including
Reynaldo, who shares a dream. “. . . I saw the
sperm just swimming with my face on them and,
it’s just—you’re thinking that each one of them is
a possibility to have a child. And it just takes one
and there’s millions . . .”

Our data reveal that procreative consciousness,
including fecundity perceptions, often involve an
emotional response of varying type and intensity.
Tom, a 22-year-old Native American, describes
the intense sadness he felt when he accompanied
his fiance to the hospital to deliver a 2-month-old
fetus that had been dead for at least 2 weeks:

“. . .[B]efore that [trip to the hospital] it was
like, “oh the baby’s dead,” not that many emo-
tions coming out. But when I saw her on the cart
going into the emergency room, it just hit
me . . . the entire time I was just outside, bawling
my eyes out.”

Although some men whose partners have abor-
tions also experience extreme sadness and anger,
others report having much milder reactions to
abortion. Beyond sadness and anger, numerous men
report having emotions such as fear, insecurity, am-
bivalence, attachment, joy, and pride when circum-
stances trigger their procreative consciousness.
Those men who had develop a greater depth and
breadth of knowledge, both within and between
specific areas of the procreative realm (e.g., con-
traception, abortion, pregnancy, childbirth) appear
to have a richer and fuller procreative conscious-
ness. Another important feature of procreative
consciousness seems to be the distinction between
direct, experiential knowledge and indirect ways
of knowing. From a symbolic interactionist per-
spective, the accuracy of men’s stock of knowl-
edge is likely to be less important than the degree
to which men have “knowledge” (and associated
feelings) about something relevant to their procre-
ative consciousness, including a sense of respon-
sibility. Warren’s comments are illustrative, as he
talks about times when he’s lying naked next to
his current partner:

`. . . [When] I am not wearing a condom, I want
to put some type of barrier between us. But she
feels that’s breaking the moment if we’re just
lying there. And I am trying to explain to her
that well, if I get excited I have heard that some
sperm can exit . . . and she feels I’m being overly
paranoid and so I try not to listen to the voices
when they tell me you need to put underwear on
or pull the sheet over her or something.

In this instance, Warren indicates that he has folk
knowledge about preejaculatory fluids that might
put him at risk of impregnating his partner. Com-
pared to those men who do not possess this depth
of knowledge, Warren is likely to experience his
procreative consciousness more fully and, appar-
ently, more often during intimate moments with
his sexual partner. As we listen to participants who
have encountered specific fertility events, such as
an abortion, pregnancy, or childbirth, the com-
monsense adage “knowing through doing” rings
true. Those men who have experienced different
types of fertility events seem able to express their
procreative consciousness in a broader fashion. It
might be useful, therefore, to differentiate men’s
experiential knowledge from that which is based solely on second-hand sources such as friends, parents, TV shows, and school experiences. The temporal dimension is closely associated with our previous discussion about men’s situational and global procreative consciousness. It encompasses the duration of context-specific episodes and the more enduring periods in which men are attentive to their procreative consciousness. The frequency with which men experience themselves in this way is another feature of the temporal dimension. We observe considerable variability in how often men’s procreative consciousness is activated. Contrast Raymond’s earlier comment, about not spending any time thinking about his procreative abilities, with Desmond’s response when we ask how often he thinks about his ability to impregnate females: “. . . [I]t probably comes into your thoughts daily. . . So, yeah, I think about it often.” Or consider Derrick, a 19-year-old African American who implies that he activates his procreative consciousness frequently: “I would always talk to her every night and I’d be like, have you taken your pill today?”

The final dimension we encounter in our data involve men’s visions of children they might eventually sire. Those visions that seem most relevant to procreative consciousness include the mental images men construct of specific future children, which include references to gender, personality, and physical features. To a lesser extent, references to children in a more general way are significant, too. Additionally, men express child visions by talking excitedly about sharing activities with their future children. For instance, Austin, who is 21 years old and White, implies that his procreative consciousness is often activated when some event or experience puts him on a “high”:

“. . . [I]f I see something really amazing, that just moves me. If I see something like that, I’ll be, god, if I ever have a child or, I’d want them to experience this”

DISCUSSION

Guided by a symbolic interactionist perspective and the two sensitizing concepts, procreative consciousness and procreative responsibility, our study yields new insights about the social psychology of men’s procreative identities and experiences. We are confident that our efforts to secure a diverse set of participants enabled us to achieve the type of analytic generalizability fundamental to grounded theory analyses. Our data reveal the various ways in which young men learn about their fecundity and what it means to them. Although some portray it as a “scary” and significant discovery, most learn about their fecundity status with little fanfare, in part because they know that their peers have similar capabilities. Their comparative appraisals, focused as they are on others, apparently minimize the import of their own developmental transition and limit the chances for many men to see their procreative ability as a significant turning point in their lives. We also find hints of possible connections between males’ ways of initially “knowing,” or subsequently refining their “knowledge” about their procreative potential (i.e., book knowledge, first-hand experience with sex, pregnancy scare, pregnancy), and the meaning men attach to this knowledge.

These preliminary findings support the notion that males’ evolving procreative consciousness is fundamentally a social accomplishment, one that can be viewed simultaneously as a social process and product. Young men develop perceptions and feelings about themselves as procreative beings as they age, take sex education classes, observe how others deal with reproductive events, have conversations with family and friends, and accumulate their own romantic relationships and procreative experiences. From a theoretical perspective, understanding why and how men do or do not weave these specific experiences into a distinct and coherent procreative identity warrants careful study.

We also find evidence, consistent with the first author’s theoretical framework (Marsiglio, 1998), that males experience their procreative consciousness in specific situations as well as in a more global fashion. Likewise, the young men we interviewed provide numerous examples of how their previous or current partners contributed to their procreative consciousness and, in some cases, they confirm a more individual mode of consciousness that is not tied to their specific relationships. In some instances, then, these young men’s narratives provide clear and detailed evidence that men’s current procreative consciousness has been constructed out of their reaction to earlier situated and relationship-based experiences.

Our substantive analyses alert us to a variety of dimensions relevant to men’s procreative consciousness, including fecundity perception, emotional response, knowledge, temporality, and child
visions. By concentrating on these dimensions we begin to sharpen our understanding of them. These initial analyses should inform future research exploring the conceptual complexity and overlapping nature to men’s subjective experiences in the procreative realm. Specifically, research needs to focus on how the dimensions we identify are interrelated. Future research should also consider whether these dimensions are related to how central men believe particular experiences are to their procreative identities. Furthermore, research needs to consider the possible connections between men’s procreative identities and their more general sense of self.

Our findings also underscore the need for survey researchers, especially those with access to longitudinal data, to develop strategies for capturing more fully the situational and relationship context within which men experience themselves as procreative beings. Relatedly, attempts should be made to collect representative survey data that would enable researchers to examine how males’ individual and relationship-based experiences, as well as their situational and global modes of consciousness, are related to one another over time, and how these connections might be influenced by demographic characteristics and other factors. Although survey methodologies are not well suited to studying the nuances of social processes, a fuller complement of items assessing the various dimensions of males’ subjective experiences, as they relate to their procreative consciousness and experiences, would enable researchers to strengthen and expand their inferences about the causal mechanisms underlying males’ behaviors in the procreative realm. These efforts would extend the already valuable work that has recently been conducted on male’s subjective experiences involving condom use (Ku, Sonenstein, & Pleck, 1994; Pleck, Sonenstein, & Ku, 1991, 1993). Ultimately, though, in-depth interviews and ethnographic research done in multiple, diverse sites offer the best option for providing us with a deep and contextualized understanding of young men’s lives as procreative beings.

Having shown that males vary considerably in their procreative feelings and thoughts, as well as in their perception about their procreative responsibilities, future research should attempt to identify and make sense of factors that might account for this variation. We intend to study the turning points that young men identify as significant in their lives as sexual and procreative beings. These analyses should provide us with additional insights about men’s past, present, and future images of self as these images relate to the procreative realm. Such insights will move us closer to understanding the processes associated with how men evolve and express themselves as procreative beings. Consequently, this type of research should prove useful to social service providers and health care professionals who are interested in helping young men become better informed and more responsible about sex, contraception, health, and paternity issues.

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