

PATHWAYS TO FATHERHOOD: LOW-INCOME, NON-CUSTODIAL MEN'S ROLE IN FERTILITY
DECISIONS

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Over the past several decades, nonmarital childbearing rates have risen sharply. This trend has been most prevalent among socially and economic disadvantaged groups. While recent research has cast light upon the many reasons that disadvantaged groups delay (or defer) marriage, thereby increasing the likelihood that a birth will take place outside of marriage, less is understood about motivations for having children outside of marriage. At the same time, men's (compared to women's) motivations for having children remain unclear. In this paper, we explore the role that low-income, non-custodial fathers play in the fertility decision process. Using in depth interview data ($N = 171$) from White, Black, and Hispanic fathers, we analyze fathers' role in the fertility process at four different levels of intentionality (accidental, unexpected but not accidental, unplanned but not unexpected, planned), and describe the complex interplay between intention, socioeconomic disadvantage, and the circumstances surrounding men's pathways into fatherhood.

Pathways to Fatherhood: Low-Income, Non-Custodial Men's Role in Fertility Decisions

In the U.S. today, more than one-third of all births take place outside of marriage (Hamilton, Martin, & Sutton, 2003). While nonmarital childbearing has grown more common across all segments of the population, the largest proportion of nonmarital births are concentrated among socially and economically disadvantaged groups (Ventura & Bachrach, 2000). Unmarried mothers and fathers, for example, are younger, less educated, more likely to be Black or Hispanic, and have lower average earnings than married fathers and mothers (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2004). Part of this increase in nonmarital fertility among lower socioeconomic groups is related to changes in union formation, such as delaying marriage or cohabitating (Wu & Wolfe, 2001), which according to economic perspectives, are the result of declining real wages of less educated men and diminishing returns to marriage (Oppenheimer, 1994). Qualitative research has also provided insights, revealing that lower socioeconomic groups desire to marry, but feel they lack the material security they need to do so (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). Nevertheless, studies on disadvantaged groups' union formation patterns only explain one element of nonmarital fertility: delayed or deferred marriage (Wu & Wolfe, 2001). Explanations for why disadvantaged groups— for whom raising children is particularly costly— proceed with parenthood are less developed.

In order to fully understand the rise in nonmarital fertility rates, it is necessary to consider the reasons that low-income parents give for having children outside of marriage. At present, we have some understanding of low-income mothers' motivations for having children outside of marriage. For these women, motherhood is viewed as a cherished, life-altering experience that has inspired them to improve their life situations. These mothers also express distrust of the fathers of their children, however, and frequently cite instances of infidelity, abuse, and

abandonment (England, Edin, & Linnenberg, 2003; Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Thus, while marriage may be an elusive goal for many low-income mothers, motherhood is an invaluable source of meaning and comfort. The question of low-income, unmarried men's motivations for having children, on the other hand, is largely absent from both the literature on fatherhood and the demographic literature on fertility (Greene and Biddlecom, 2000). The studies on men's fertility that do exist focus principally on the demographic correlates of nonmarital fertility, especially risk factors and contraceptive use (Burkner, Martin, and Bearman, 2004; Thornberry, Smith, and Howard, 1997). Moreover, most of these studies focus on adolescent males. Much less is known about men's motivations for having children across the life course.

Using ethnographic data drawn from repeated, intensive interviews with 171 low-income, non-custodial White, Black, and Hispanic fathers, this study aims to add to our understanding the linkage between socioeconomic disadvantage and nonmarital fertility. To capture the complexity of this issue, we first establish the level of intentionality fathers describe with respect to each pregnancy. In contrast to the conventional binary system (i.e. wanted versus mistimed) employed by the National Surveys of Family Growth (NSFG) and other large-scale surveys, we measure intentionality using a four-level system of categorization that emerged directly from our data. We argue that these four categories not only reflect more accurately the ways in which the men in our study talked about fertility, but they offer a framework for understanding much of the ambivalence commonly reported by unmarried men and women when asked about their fertility intentions (Brown & Eisenberg, 1995). By exploring the circumstances surrounding men's lives at each level of intentionality, this study aims to illuminate patterns in the pathways by which low-income men become fathers, to complement what we know about mothers' perceptions of nonmarital childbearing, and to enhance our understanding of nonmarital fertility in the U.S.

Economics and Low-Income, Non-Custodial Fathers

The motivations for low-income men's nonmarital fertility are less understood than the motivations for low-income women's nonmarital fertility. For example, low-income women's nonmarital fertility has often been associated with an undersupply of "marriageable" partners, especially for low-income Black women (Lichter, LeClere, & McLaughlin, 1991; South & Lloyd, 1992). This undersupply not only reflects demographic realities (e.g. imbalanced sex ratios), but also the fact that a disproportionate number of low-income men (compared to low-income women or middle-class men) lack stable employment, are involved in criminal activity, and abuse drugs and alcohol (Sigle-Rushton & McLanahan, 2004). Because many low-income women have difficulty finding a suitable marriage partner, nonmarital childbearing is often the only viable pathway to motherhood (Edin, 2000) and toward achieving a role that not only brings innumerable emotive rewards, but which many mothers (across the socioeconomic spectrum) view as constitutive of their lives as women (Nakano Glenn, 1994).

For low-income fathers, the benefits to fatherhood are less evident. First, fathers are still largely defined by a breadwinner model that equates successful fathering with providing financial support for the family (Waller, 2002). Although many middle-class men struggle to meet their families' economic needs, low-income men in particular must navigate a modern-day labor market that provides very little opportunity to attain stable employment and provide for a family (Wilson, 1987). As a consequence, many low-income men are often prohibited from ever fully satisfying the father role (Anderson, 1990; Liebow, 1967). Second, many low-income, unmarried (nonresident) fathers have low levels of involvement with their children. This is because they may do shift-work, they are incarcerated, they do not get along well with the mother, or they have withdrawn from their children's lives for other reasons (Zill & Nord, 1996).

Whatever the reason, many low-income, unmarried fathers do not fully experience the benefits of having children (Willis and Haaga, 1996). Thus, the factors that influence low-income men's decisions to enter into nonmarital fatherhood remain unclear.

Sociodemographic Risk and Risk Taking

Many scholars view nonmarital fertility as a product of risk taking behavior. According to this perspective, the disadvantages that many low-income men faced growing-up (e.g. living in poor neighborhoods, being raised by low-educated, young, single mothers) have effected their perceptions of risk and the opportunity costs to risky behaviors (Thornberry, Smith, and Howard, 1997). This pattern has been observed particularly in adolescent males.

Nonmarital fertility among adolescents has been linked to a host of risk behaviors, such as drugs and alcohol use, inconsistent contraceptive use, having multiple sex partners, and participating in deviant peer activities (Santelli, Brener, Lowry, Bhatt, & Zabin, 1998; Pears, Pierce, Kim, Capaldi, & Owen, 2005). These risk taking behaviors are also correlated with low academic achievement and negative attitudes toward school (Burkner, Martin, and Bearman, 2004), suggesting that disadvantaged adolescents are less future-oriented and perceive fewer "opportunity costs," such as reduced educational opportunities, to risky behavior (Rindfuss, Morgan, and Swicegood, 1988). Indeed, unmarried young fathers commonly report that they do not believe that having a child will be a major life set-back for them (Gohel, Diamond, & Chambers, 1997). Thus, because disadvantaged adolescents face limited opportunities for economic success, low-income males may be more likely take risks, in general, and be less likely, in particular, to be motivated to avoid fertility (Burton, Obeidallah, & Allison, 1996). In terms of fertility intentions, research on risk behavior therefore suggests that nonmarital

pregnancies among many long-income men are more or less the unintended, or accidental, consequence of a pattern of behavior associated with socioeconomic disadvantage.

Motivations for Becoming a Father

Although low-income men's risk behaviors are associated with nonmarital fertility, not all births are completely accidental. Like women, many low-income men may desire to become parents, even if they lack the material resources to satisfy the breadwinner role. One reason that low-income men (compared to middle class men) may want to become fathers is because fatherhood is an attainable marker of the transition to adulthood (Zill & Nord, 1996). Compared to those in the middle class, disadvantaged young men have difficulty achieving key markers of success, such as good grades, college enrollment, or a well-paying job. Therefore, they transition—often quite early—into fatherhood because being a father is a role the men feel they can successfully perform (Burton, Obeidallah, & Allison, 1996).

For many low-income, non-custodial men, fatherhood also brings social and emotional rewards. Fatherhood can represent a turning point or exit route from such risky behaviors (Elder 1998). Indeed, studies on young men who have become fathers find evidence that they display greater maturity than their childless peers by participating in socially productive work, volunteer activities, and curtailing their risk-taking behaviors (Kowaleski-Jones & Mott, 1998; Umberson 1987). Additionally, fatherhood may bring men into closer contact with family, friends, and other social connections—connections which low-income men may have had difficulty maintaining. Many new fathers report higher levels of social integration compared with their childless counterparts, and unmarried fathers in particular report an increase in social integration (Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003) and self-esteem (among cohabitators) (Woo and Raley 2005). Lastly, like mothers, fathers may value the social and emotional connection they share with their

children. In fact, many low-income fathers report that having someone to love and spend time with was one of their primary motivations for having children (Schoen, Kim, Mathanson, Fields, and Astone, 1997).

Fertility Intentions

In addition to exploring the positive benefits of fatherhood for low-income fathers, or the association between socioeconomic disadvantage, risk behavior, and nonmarital fertility, much of the current research on nonmarital fertility also looks at the role of “intentions” (Klerman, 2000; Brown & Eisenberg, 1995). “Intentions” is a useful theoretical concept for understanding nonmarital fertility because it captures both attitudes and behaviors (Klerman, 2000). Policy makers have also been interested in research on intentions in efforts to reduce both rates of nonmarital fertility and unwanted pregnancy, which is associated with poor prenatal care and child health outcomes (Brown & Eisenberg, 1995). In reality, however, intentions have proven difficult to measure (Bachrach & Newcomer, 1999). Not only do individuals interpret questions about intentions differently, but the decision to have a child is made by both men and women. The majority of studies only ask mothers about fertility intentions.

One thing we know from national studies of women’s fertility intentions is that low-income mothers and unmarried mothers are more likely to report an unintended pregnancy than middle-class mothers or married mothers (Henshaw 1998; Finer & Henshaw, 2006). Although we do not have national statistics based on fathers’ reports, Waller’s (2002) in-depth interviews with 65 low-income fathers similarly find that nearly 85 percent of the pregnancies in her study were unintended. While access to contraception or information about proper contraceptive use may partly explain socioeconomic differences in men’s (and women’s) fertility intentions, research on low-income men’s actual contraceptive use suggests that men may have more access

to and knowledge of contraception than implied by statistics on unintended fertility (Brown & Eisenberg, 1995).

What, then explains, the association between low-socioeconomic status and unintended fertility among men? One explanation is that these men are more ambivalent than middle class men about contraception and pregnancy, and have relatively weaker desires to avoid childbearing (Burkner, Martin, & Bearman, 2004; Zabin, Astone, & Emerson, 1993). Weak desire to avoid childbearing, then, increases the likelihood of a nonmarital birth (Jaccard, Helbig, Wan, Gutman, & Kritzsilverstein, 1990). This weaker desire to avoid fertility may reflect the complexity of low-income men's lives and their often conflicting attitudes toward fatherhood. On one hand, low-income non-custodial fathers may feel economically unprepared for the birth of a child. On the other hand, fathers may long for the emotional and social rewards of fatherhood. Additionally, ambivalence toward fertility may also be associated with conflicting beliefs about over the future of the romantic relationship. For example, low-income unmarried men may hope for their current relationship to last, but simultaneously fear that it will eventually end due to conflicts over economic matters. Indeed, previous research has found an inconsistent association between relationship quality (e.g. commitment) and fertility behavior (Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2000; (Pears, Pierce, Kim, Capaldi, & Owen, 2005). These factors need to be teased out through further empirical research.

Overview of Research

In this study, we use ethnographic data to explore low-income men's perceptions of their trajectories into fatherhood. In order to do this, first we establish a four-tiered typology of intentions that reflects the ways that fathers talk about fertility and allows for a more complex conceptualization of fertility intentions. Moreover, this system also enables us to explore in

greater depth much of the ambivalence commonly referenced in the fertility literature. Secondly, we analyze the attitudes, contexts, and constraints characterizing the men's lives at each level of intentionality and describe patterns in motivations underlying their pathways into fatherhood.

METHODS

Data and Sample

This study draws on data from a large-scale, in-depth interview study of 460 low-income, non-custodial fathers in three cities: Philadelphia, PA; Charleston, SC; and San Antonio, TX. The fathers who participated in this study were between 17 and 53 years of age (with roughly half under 30 and half over 30), had at least one non-custodial child under the age of 18, and earned less than \$16,000 per year in the formal economy. Though our sample is not nationally representative, we have attempted to sample across the range of low-income non-custodial fathers in our target cities and neighborhoods, including White, African-American, and Hispanic fathers. We conducted all of the interviews between 1995 and 2000, and most fathers were interviewed multiple times.

We restrict our analytic sample for this study to include only fathers from Philadelphia ($n = 171$). This restriction was made in order to reduce the confounding effects of state-level child support laws (which have been estimated to reduce nonmarital fertility), the conditions of the local labor market, and community-level contexts (i.e. sex-ratios, regional cultural differences, or the role of the drug economy) (Harknett & McLanahan, 2004; Huang, 2005; Yamaguchi & Kandel, 1987). As Table 1 indicates, our analytic sample includes roughly equal proportions of White, Black, and Hispanic fathers. The average age of our sample was thirty four years old. The average age at first birth was around twenty-three years old. The men in our sample reported a mean of 2.5 pregnancies and 2.4 births with an average of 1.6 partners. Racial and

ethnic differences were small. Blacks tended to have slightly more pregnancies (2.8) and births (2.4) than Whites (2.5 pregnancies and 2.3 births). Hispanics tended to have fewer births (1.9) and pregnancies (1.7) than both Whites and Blacks. Blacks also averaged more partners (1.8) compared to Whites (1.5) and Hispanics (1.4). Additionally, Blacks transitioned to fatherhood at slightly older ages than did Whites and Hispanics (23.4 years old compared to 21.8 for Whites and 22.3 for Hispanics).

[Table 1 About Here]

Recruitment and Interview Procedures

In all three cities, respondents were recruited from a select group of target neighborhoods (census tract clusters) using 1990 census data. Three criteria were used to select the neighborhoods for sample recruitment: neighborhoods (census tract clusters) that contained a significant number of households of a particular racial or ethnic group, neighborhoods with significant numbers of poor single mothers (and presumably, non-custodial fathers) of that ethnic group, and neighborhoods with moderate to high levels of poverty (20 percent or more). For the Philadelphia sub-sample, nine target neighborhoods were identified that were either within the city or in its poorest inner suburb, namely, Camden, New Jersey.

In each target neighborhood, a team of seven interviewers conducted several months of fieldwork to establish local contacts. By talking with employers, grassroots community leaders, and social service providers, researchers established the range of unskilled and semi-skilled non-custodial fathers we might expect to find in these neighborhoods. Using these contacts, they began to garner referrals to fathers. These sources were not sufficient, however, because few low-income non-custodial fathers seemed to have ties with community leaders and neighborhood organizations. To make matters worse, once they did obtain a referral, they often found it hard to

locate the fathers since in many cases men were moving from place to place and had no stable residence. Even after locating fathers, interviewers found that establishing rapport was initially difficult and time consuming, and fathers often mistrusted those who had referred them.

By trial and error, interviewers were generally able to sort out the least problematic of the referral sources, and began to utilize street contacts (cold contacts made on street corners that may serve as hangouts, informal sector day labor corners, and so on) and a limited number of snowball referrals (from fathers who participated to other fathers). To strike a balance between the need for trust between interviewer and respondent and the necessity of recruiting as heterogeneous a sample as possible from within the neighborhood (sampling across the range), a rule was adopted stipulating that within each study sub-cell, no more than five fathers from any given social network could be included.

After a father agreed to participate in the study, interviewers made an appointment to meet him at his home or, more commonly, at a public place within his neighborhood (many fathers were living with girlfriends, sisters, their own mothers, or with friends, and wanted more privacy than these settings would afford). To protect confidentiality, fathers were asked to choose a pseudonym, which was used to identify all of the data we gathered for that father. Interviewers typically engaged each father in two or more conversations. These conversations were semi-structured (the interviewer eventually covered an extensive list of predetermined topics), but interviewers tried to make these conversations as natural as possible by following up on cues given by respondents in the course of the conversation. Therefore, respondents generally determined the order in which the topics were covered. The precise way in which the question was asked also varied from interview to interview and followed the flow of the conversation.

The content of the interviews covered a range of topics, including employment history, family background, views on marriage and parental roles, child support knowledge and practices, and income and expenses over the prior year. Interviewers also asked about how subjects first became fathers and to describe each subsequent relationship that resulted in pregnancy—including how they met the mother, their birth control practices, their own reactions to the pregnancy (and reactions of significant others, including family members), any discussions of abortion or adoption, and their own feelings after the child was born, miscarried or aborted.

Interviewers were both male and female. Two interviewers were White, three were Hispanic, and two were Black. Many of the interviews with Hispanic fathers were conducted in Spanish by a Hispanic interviewer, and then later translated into English. To our knowledge, the race/ethnicity of gender of the interviewer did not affect the quality interview of the type of information that was gathered.

Analysis

All interviews were taped and transcribed, and ranged from roughly 25 to 150 double-spaced pages per interviewee. We coded these interviews using standard qualitative coding methods, and stored coded material by topic using a computerized database (Microsoft Access). We then retrieved topical material by category for more refined qualitative coding and analysis, while intact transcripts were retained for context (Corbin and Strauss 1990). For this particular analysis, we relied on both the database and on a careful reading of each full transcript.

Our analysis for this study proceeded in two steps. First, we reexamined the data pertaining to fertility and coded each reported pregnancy for intentionality using a coding scheme that emerged from the data. The coding scheme involved four levels of intentionality: *unwanted* (where the father believed birth control was being used), *unexpected but not*

accidental(where the subject knowingly engaged in unprotected sex but claimed he did not think much about the consequences), *unplanned but not entirely accidental* (the respondent and his partner knowingly engaged in unprotected sex, and the subject claims he considered the consequences and was agreeable to the possibility of pregnancy), and *planned* (the subject said the couple verbally agreed to get pregnant and took steps to do so). A breakdown of intentionality by race and ethnic group is provided in Table 2. Then, we analyzed men’s narratives at each level of intentionality. This procedure enabled us to more clearly identify patterns related to men’s role in the fertility decision and process.

[Table 2 About Here]

FINDINGS

Before analyzing fathers’ role in the fertility decision process, we wanted to provide a more detailed description of the lives of the low-income, non-custodial fathers in our study. It is important to contextualize the lives of these men because, to a significant extent, the men in this study experienced more hardship than the women in their lives, often depending upon mothers, grandmothers and girlfriends for housing, and sometimes even food. A high proportion of men in the study had also abused drugs and alcohol at some point in their lives, and many were involved in the drug trade. Involvement with drugs was particularly pervasive among Hispanic fathers. As the fathers in our study talked about their lives growing-up, many described tremendous hardship. Some recounted being abused by their fathers and step-fathers, while others discussed what it was like growing-up without a father figure at all. Although some fathers did grow-up with married parents or lived in working-class neighborhoods, this was not normative for our sample.

In terms of education, many fathers had dropped out of school. A smaller proportion completed high school and some obtained vocational training or a year or two of college education although this was far less common. Men's labor market experiences were also quite complicated. Many men worked a variety of jobs, from food service to construction to working informal jobs such as roofing and painting. A large majority of fathers found themselves unemployed at some point in their lives. Lastly, very few men in the sample had been married (although White and Hispanic fathers reported more instances of marriage than Black fathers). Some fathers had cohabited with their girlfriends for several years, and several fathers considered themselves married, even if they were not married by law.

Accidental Pregnancies

The first category of fertility intentions we explore is *accidental pregnancies*. Compared to the other categories of intentionality, accidental pregnancies were the most easily identified and were generally captured in one of three scenarios. In the first scenario, the man believed he was infertile, and therefore he found it unnecessary to use contraception. In the case of Bruce, a forty-five year old unemployed and homeless White man, at forty-three years and after decades of unprotected sex, he mistakenly fathered twins. Paul, a thirty-five year old White man, was similarly surprised by when his girlfriend became pregnant with his four-year old son. As Paul recounted, "I was 31, and I didn't have any kids yet. I was already on the verge of 'I must can't make none,' because I have been with plenty of females...without using condoms."

In the second scenario, both parties thought they were practicing effective contraception, but there was a failure either in the device or its application. For example, when William, a twenty-five year old African American with four children, was asked about the conception of his

oldest child, he said, “[My girlfriend] told me she was taking birth control pills every day faithfully, somehow she just got pregnant. I don’t see how... I told her I didn’t want none, not yet, I ain’t want none, and she said she ain’t want none neither.” When a contraceptive failure did occur, the couples frequently discussed the possibility of having an abortion. Although some of these pregnancies were not carried to term, more often couples were unable to agree on whether or not to have an abortion. As a result, the child was usually carried to term.

Lastly, some men reported having been misled by their girlfriends into believing that their partners were regularly using birth control. This story was told more often by young men than by older men. Additionally, these young fathers had generally been romantically involved with their girlfriends for only short periods of time before the pregnancy. For example, Joel, a forty-one year old Hispanic father of two, said that with his first child (whom he had at age nineteen), “I wanted to use protection and she said, ‘no, don’t worry about it. I am using birth control.’ And she showed me her pills but I guess she wasn’t taking them.” Other men reported being misled into believing their partner was using contraception because contraception was, in their view, the woman’s responsibility. As Kevin (a Black twenty-eight year old father who had his first child when he was fifteen) said, “A guy grows-up thinking that if he is intimate with a female, she is supposed to be on birth control.” In this example, the couple neither discussed contraception or the desire to avoid pregnancy and the man often himself devolved himself of fertility-related responsibilities.

While these three general scenarios reflect common circumstances surrounding accidental pregnancies, what is most significant here is that they were relatively uncommon. Accidental pregnancies constituted 17 % of all reported pregnancies in this sample. This included pregnancies that ended in abortion. The relatively infrequent occurrence of what are

sometimes considered “unplanned” or “unwanted” pregnancies suggests that even among pregnancies that are not entirely planned, few are complete accidents. Thus, more consideration needs to be given to alternate pathways to fatherhood. Next we turn to one of these alternative pathways, exploring what we termed “unexpected but not accidental pregnancies.”

Unexpected but not accidental Pregnancies

Unexpected but not accidental pregnancies included pregnancies where the men did not intend to have a child, but knew that it was possible and still did not take preventative measures to ensure that a pregnancy did not occur. This category is by far the largest, constituting almost half of the pregnancies. In many ways, it is also the most conceptually complex. These men were not ignorant about fertility or methods of birth control. As Thomas, a White twenty-seven year old, put it, “If you get pregnant, you get pregnant, you know what I’m saying, and not out of careless sex, cuz if you don’t want to get pregnant you know what to do.” Yet at the same time, the men were not using condoms, they knew that their girlfriends were not taking precautions to avoid fertility, and they were not consciously hoping to conceive a child. Quite simply, most of these men said that they “just weren’t thinking about it.” The question of why they were not thinking about it, however, is a more difficult one to answer.

For some men, particularly young men, “not thinking about it” was associated with a history of risk-taking. Many of these younger fathers were involved in delinquent activities, were not using contraception, were using drugs, and were sometimes even selling drugs. In some ways, these risk-taking fathers were not considering the opportunity costs of fatherhood. Rather, sex gave the men a shot of self-confidence and marked a passage into adulthood. As Ernest, a Black thirty-two old with an eighteen year old son, said:

When you having sex back then, when I was my age, especially with me, having sex it was like one of the most best things in the world. And you just knew you was a grown-up... You're not thinking about responsibilities. You ain't thinking about all the money you got to spend for the baby food. I'm not thinking, 'Oh well there goes college.'

Unexpected but not accidental pregnancies were also associated with shorter relationship duration. Many of the fathers had only briefly dated their partners before the pregnancy. Although some couples were cohabiting at the time of conception, most couples were not and many had moved in together only after learning about the pregnancy. Thus, unexpected but not accidental pregnancies may have also been linked to poor communication about contraception that is often characteristic of early relationships.

Clearly, relationship characteristics and risk-taking are related to contraceptive behavior. Yet, some nonmarital pregnancies are more complex. While some young fathers did deny paternity or encouraged their girlfriends to have abortions, many of men were excited by the news that they were going to be fathers and wanted their girlfriends to have the child. Many fathers, including young fathers, repeatedly said that "they always wanted to have a child," and they described the births of their children as transformative experiences that helped bridge strained family relations (e.g. talking about how the pregnancy made their mothers happy and one man even reported his father stopped drinking), motivated them to get their lives together (e.g. getting a job or going back to school), and provided them with something permanent and stable in their lives. This last point is well illustrated by Ernest, who goes on to say about the birth of his son, "I was nervous. I was excited. I was a lot of things all at once. I didn't know what to do. But one thing that I did know for sure, it was mine. And that's the only one that I have in the world." Other fathers similarly talked about having something that was truly theirs.

Thus, the immutable nature of fatherhood was for many, an underlying motivation for entering into fatherhood. One on hand, fathers were consciously aware that they were not financially ready for fatherhood, and many men believed that the ideal time to have a child was when you are working and have steady wages. Yet on the other hand, work and relationships were transitory endeavors, and fatherhood provided a constant source of pride and happiness. An exchange with Bucket, a Black forty-six year old father of two who has been together with his girlfriend off-and-on for thirteen years, is particularly illuminative with respect to work and instability:

I: What is the ideal time to become a father?

R: When you are financially able to take care of the children. And that's when, nowadays?

I: You have no idea?

R: No idea, because when is it? I mean, shoot, for the average guy it don't last long. You might work this week and be out the next week. You know?

Indeed, for many men there was very little indication of when a stable work situation would materialize or how long it would last. It was not uncommon for the men to have worked several different jobs in a year and to struggle in between jobs to find informal means—legal or illegal—of supplementing their incomes.

Similarly, the men's romantic relationships were quite fragile, often dissolving after experiencing a period of financial hardship. As Jeff, a Black forty-four year old father whose two children were the result of unexpected but not accidental pregnancies said, "Love is like running water. It turns off and it turns on. I really believe that besides the fact that they can love you when you are doing, but when you don't do, they don't love." Younger men were similarly

unconvinced that romantic relationships could endure economic hardship, often voicing considerable distrust of women. Montay, a twenty-nine year old Black father, links his distrust of women to his childhood, saying that, “Coming up, a lot of things was done to me wrong by the females. I mean no female ever treated me right except my grandmother.” Even in long-term relationships, many men reported periods of separation. Most of these bouts of separation were linked to periods of hardship where the men were unemployed, did not have a stable residence, and were deeply depressed, resorting to drugs and alcohol.

Furthermore, the fact that many of these fathers had been in short-term relationships suggests that in many ways, “unexpected but not accidental” pregnancies represented an individualistic approach to fertility. In other words, the men valued fatherhood and welcomed the idea of becoming fathers, but did not situate fatherhood within the experience of their romantic relationships. Indeed, many of them did not anticipate long-term relationships with their girlfriends, even after they became pregnant, and did not know if their financial situations would be durable enough to sustain their full involvement with their children. Thus, given the volatility of both work and romantic relationships, fatherhood was viewed one thing that was consistently enduring, even if fathers did not see their children everyday. As George, a Hispanic thirty five year old (who sees his daughter irregularly), said:

You are never alone. You always have something when you are down, you always have something to look over and boost you up. Cuz when you are down and depressed, when you're together you can always look over and say, wait a minute, you know what I mean, there is a little piece of me right there.

With the intense degree of hardship permeating these men's lives, conscientious planning of a child seemed almost more irrational than failing to use regular contraception. Thus, men backed

into the pregnancy, where they had the space and freedom to pursue fatherhood on an individual (rather than partnered) level. Thus, unexpected but not accidental pregnancies, although sometimes linked to risk-taking behavior and poor communication between partners, were often the complex realization of situation in which few things were stable and enduring. In this way, fatherhood presented a welcomed and permanent presence in their lives.

Unplanned but not Completely Unexpected

Pregnancies that were *unplanned but were not completely unexpected* were often characterized by the men as “semi-planned.” In some ways, these pregnancies resembled the unexpected but not accidental pregnancies in that the pregnancy was not carefully planned or timed. In contrast to the “unexpected but not accidental” pregnancies, these men were more cognizant that their actions might result in pregnancy, and were generally not negatively disposed to that result. There was also often casual discussion between the couple regarding having children, but deliberate actions were not taken by the men to try to conceive a child.

Take for example an exchange with Michael, a Black forty-one year old:

I: Was it (the pregnancy) planned?

R: Semi-planned.

I: What’s semi-planned? Did you plan to have a child?

R: No. It was an accident. We didn’t sit down and say we wanted to have a baby. It just happened.

I: Did you think she might get pregnant?

R: Yeah, but I didn’t care. It was good. I was still a young man. I wasn’t wearing no protection, so it happened.

Some men whose pregnancies fell in this category also suggested that from their perspectives, the pregnancy was unplanned, but that they knew that their girlfriends had stopped taking birth control and were more than likely hoping to conceive a child. Most of the men did not object to this practice for two reasons. First, they felt that it would make their girlfriends happy. As Ahmed, a Black nineteen year old who has two children by the same mother, recounted, “She felt as though she had a void in her life and she wanted something she could call her own. And me being in love with her, you know, I gave this to her.” Secondly, they were extremely excited upon hearing the news that they were going to have a child, even when family members were less enthusiastic. For example, when asked about his immediate reaction when he found out about the pregnancy, Ozzy, a white thirty-five year old says about the birth of his only child, “I was happy. I always wanted to have a kid. My grandmother would say, ‘have an abortion or give her up for adoption.’ I’d say, ‘no ma. I’m keeping her.’ I always liked kids. I always wanted one.” Other fathers with planned but not unexpected pregnancies also stated that becoming a father made them feel more mature and gave them a sense of pride.

At this level many fathers still had reservations about their abilities to shoulder the responsibilities of fatherhood. Yet compared to “unexpected but not accidental” fathers, these fathers were making more of a conscious decision to take a gamble and risk pregnancy. Men were more conscientious about this gamble because they overall, had more stability in their lives. These men were likely to be cohabiting with their girlfriends, their relationships were stronger, and they were generally working in well-paying jobs. They also felt more confident about having a child with that particular partner because, as many men expressed, they loved her and wanted to have a child with her. As Jack, a White thirty-three year old who had been cohabiting with his girlfriend for one year told (he was twenty at the time of birth) said, “I was young (at the

time of pregnancy), but I was ready. I thought I was okay, let's start this family. I was excited. I was a little scared. I loved her. She was my best friend. We could do this together.” When asked what he thought about contraception, Jack replied, “it depends on the particular person and the way they feel. If they're ready for it.” In terms of economic stability, many of the men stated that “things were good,” recounting exactly how much money they were making at the time of birth or how they came about finding a nice house or apartment.

Additionally, they were more likely to view the birth of their child as marking a new phase in their lives. Sometimes this did not occur with the first child, as many men had their first child before age twenty. Yet having a child marked a chance to prove that they could, in fact, be good fathers. It was also the chance, as Raphael (an eighteen year old Hispanic father) said, “to do the things my parents didn't do with me.” Often it was the combination of a steady job, a loving relationship, and residential stability that propelled men into finally “straightening out” one's life, whether this meant coming to terms with a substance abuse problem or simply “settling down” into their current relationship. As one forty-two year old Hispanic father explained, “Things that I used to do, it was just over. I stopped right then and there and decided it was time to pick up the pieces.” As compared to the “unexpected but not accidental” fathers, these fathers viewed parenthood as a partnership. The ability to situate their lives around a stable residence, relationship, and work situation motivated men to allow themselves to create a situation where a pregnancy was likely—literally in terms of contraceptive use, and cognitively in terms of their conscious awareness that inconsistent contraceptive use could result in a pregnancy

At the same time, however, these pregnancies were still not entirely planned. This is because these fathers were still were acutely aware that there were several hurdles to overcome

before a completely planned pregnancy made sense. Some of these fathers had periodic drug or alcohol problems. Additionally, many of these men talked about how they loved their girlfriends, but did not want to get married because, as Ralph (a Black twenty-five year old) states, “I’m not sure if I’m going to be with her forever.” But, he says with respect to his unplanned but not unexpected pregnancy, “If you’re seventeen or older and you feel your mind is mature enough to do that...and you have the money to do it...” Thus, for these fathers’, their decisions to conceive were motivated by a desire to have a child which seemed more tenable given their relatively stable relationship and work situations. They were not entirely planned, however, because fathers still felt constrained by a relative uncertainty with respect to their ability to fulfill their responsibilities in the long-term.

Planned Pregnancies

The final category of pregnancies is *planned pregnancies*. Planned pregnancies are those that are the result of forethought and planning. Planned conceptions represent about 15 percent of the pregnancies in our sample. Not surprisingly, some of these planned births occurred to men who had once been married. Joel, a forty-year-old Hispanic father who planned his second child said, “[we waited until] after we got married. We waited about a year until we settled and we had a house and everything and like I said we planned the baby when we felt financially. We were both working and I said, ‘now we can plan to have a kid,’ and everything came out like we planned it.”

It was not only the previously married fathers who planned at least one of their children. In fact, several of the men who had planned pregnancies were quite young. As Joel’s comment illustrates, men who planned pregnancies generally talked about the fact that they were working good jobs, had stable residences, and saw parenthood as a part of the plans that they and their

girlfriends had laid out together. Although some of these long-term plans were upset when jobs or relationships ended, this sense of vision stands in sharp contrast to less planful fathers. For example, Bucket, who fathered three children ‘unplanned by not unexpectedly’ and who was unemployed at the time said, “I don’t think that far ahead. I don’t really like to plan. I live one day at a time. I hate making plans and then something come up and you can’t keep it. That’s why I never make promises to my children.” Bucket’s comments suggest that it was not that less planful fathers necessarily lack a future orientation; he was all too aware that the future was unpredictable, and that he did not want to disappoint his children. Instead, living day to day reflected the broader reality of these men’s lives where planning was not always a practical or fruitful strategy. This point is further exemplified by James, who had four children with four different mothers at varying levels of intentionality: “Life is good. I guess I strive to work and do everything that I do just for this moment, not for some futuristic thing that is never going to happen to me.”

The emotional motivations for planning to have a child are also revealing of the way many men, even young men who cannot support a family, became fathers. Self, a Black twenty one year-old, poignantly discussed the motivation underlying his first child which he had at nineteen and says was fully planned:

It’s just like, its just, I remember before I had children what influenced me to have children was that I felt alone. It’s a good feeling to always know that I have somebody to relate to. A child at that. Somebody that’s going to look up to me, to learn from me and things like that.

In some ways, Self’s reflections are telling of the isolation that many of the men in the study expressed. Not only did they feel isolated from their families, but they often felt distant from

their children, their girlfriends, and from society. As Dante, a thirty-eight year old Black father pointed out, “people need to hear what the men here go through...I know for a fact that if it wasn’t for my son and I was just a single guy (without kids), my life would be chaos.” In fact, a surprising number of fathers said that if it wasn’t for their children, they’d either be “out in the streets” or “dead.” A quote by Carlos, a Hispanic forty eight year old, is especially revealing of this last point:

If I didn’t have kids right now, I’d probably would have been dead...because what would have probably happen because I have friends that died from overdoses of drugs, AIDS, alcoholic seizures and all kinds of stuff and most of those guys were those that didn’t have children and I would have ended up like one of them, like a bachelor type guy with no kids and a heavy kind of addiction problem and dead by now.

DISCUSSION

The focus of this study was on low-income, non-custodial fathers and how they perceive their role in nonmarital births. Prior research highlights low-income men’s risk taking behaviors, the emotional and social benefits of fatherhood, and to a lesser extent, relationship characteristics in understanding the determinants of nonmarital fertility. The factors undoubtedly influence the processes patterning men’s transitions to fatherhood. This line of research, however, largely considers these factors separately. In this study, we employ ethnographic techniques to flesh out the complex social and emotional processes that link these factors. Because non-custodial (and nonmarital) fatherhood is most pervasive for low-income men, we considered the ways low-income men, across various racial and ethnic groups, understand their roles in nonmarital pregnancies. We do this by exploring different degrees of intentionality, and establishing the common paths taken.

We use intentionality as a framework for this study because it allows us to hone in on the complex social psychological process that subtly but powerfully drive the decisions involved in having a nonmarital birth. In measuring intentionality, we drew directly from retrospective reports in our data. We wanted to capture intentionality using the language that the fathers used and in terms that corresponded to the reality surrounding each pregnancy. Thus, we created a four level system of categorization that ranged from accidental, to unexpected but not accidental to unplanned but not entirely unexpected, to planned. In reality, these categories are more like points along a continuum. Nonetheless, the four-category system was an effective tool for understanding the similarities and differences in how the men in our sample came to have children.

As our findings show, the majority of pregnancies were neither thoroughly planned nor completely accidental. The most common category in our sample was “unexpected but not accidental” pregnancies. Indeed, this category was highly complex because many of the fathers reported that “they were not thinking about” the potential consequences of unprotected sex. While not thinking about it may be associated with risk taking among young men experiencing their first pregnancy (Marsiglio, Hutchinson, & Cohan, 2001) many men reported having multiple unexpected but not accidental pregnancies. We suggest that these pregnancies reflected a strong and constant tension between economic instability and relationship instability, on one hand, and the desire to have children, on the other. Indeed, many men were excited about the news that they were going to have children. Furthermore, many men saw fatherhood as their most significant accomplishment and as a life altering experience. Because the men in this study were neither fully committed to their partners nor on stable economic ground, they did not make a conscious, decision to have a child. At the same time, by not using contraception, they were

aware that a pregnancy could result. By entering into a pregnancy in this way, men were able to seek the social and emotional rewards of fatherhood without feeling cognitively burdened by the costs.

The second most common category was unplanned but not completely unexpected. These fathers were similar to the unexpected but not accidental fathers in that they were not completely prepared at the time of pregnancy, most especially financially, to take on the full responsibility of fatherhood. At the same time, they reported that they had felt good about their current positions in life, were happy in their present relationships, and felt that they were in place where they could tackle the challenges of fatherhood. These fathers, additionally, were more couple-oriented, and viewed their responsibility to the child as a cooperative endeavor. Nevertheless, they still had resisted overt planning because they were, for the most part, not certain about what challenges the future would bring.

This study not only revealed the complexity in low-income men's lives and how their life circumstances affected their decisions about fatherhood, but also revealed similarities with how low-income women describe their decisions to have children. Both men and women esteem parenthood and intend to provide for their children, financially and emotionally, as best they can (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). However, both low-income men and women face serious difficulty combining low-wage work and romantic relationships. As a result, a large proportion of men and women chose to have children without overt planning. These pregnancies do not reflect a lack of desire for children, nor are they generally the result of failed contraception. Rather, they occur because men and women feel ambivalent toward having children. Low-income individuals are aware of the difficulties face, given their circumstances, in raising children, but seek the same emotional rewards of parenthood that middle class parents desire.

As with any study, there were important limitations of our methods that should be acknowledged. In this study, fathers' accounts of the events preceding each birth were retrospective. This can be problematic because fathers can recall events differently, based on the outcome. Since the fathers in the sample are only required to have at least one child under the age of 18, they may be recalling events that took place anywhere from days or months to several decades prior to the interview. More ideal approaches might involve interviewing fathers immediately following conception. Such a sampling frame, however, would be extremely difficult to establish. The profound lack of data on low-income non-custodial fathers in general, and on their role in fertility in particular, we argue justifies our use of this method.

The general public and some scholars continue to assume that low-income men recklessly become fathers, are primarily interested in sex, try to evade responsibility for any resulting pregnancies. Such a view ignores the mounting qualitative evidence that suggests that a significant minority of low-income men actually intend to become fathers, and an even larger proportion, although not necessarily planning to have a child, greet the news of a baby's impending arrival with some degree of excitement and happiness. What does fatherhood mean for low-income men who have access to few economic resources? For those men living in dangerous neighborhoods, following precarious work lives, or involved in criminal activity, having a child often leaves "some evidence that I was on the planet," as one father said, or else can provide a reason to "straighten out" and stop selling drugs. These findings mirror what unmarried mothers have said about their decisions to become mothers and highlight the multiple difficulties associated with making parenthood and family life work in present day society for disadvantaged groups.

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Table 1: Demographic and Fertility Characteristics of Analytic Sample by Race and Ethnic Group ($N = 171$)

	Means			
	White	Black	Hispanic	All
Age	33.0	34.5	32.9	33.7
Age at First Birth	21.8	23.4	22.3	22.7
Number of Pregnancies	2.5	2.8	1.9	2.5
Number of Births	2.3	2.4	1.7	2.4
Number of Partners with Pregnancies	1.5	1.8	1.4	1.6
$n =$	46	79	46	171

Table 2: Fertility Intentions by Race and Ethnic Group ($N = 424$)

	Frequencies			
	White	Black	Hispanic	All
Accidental	30%	11%	15%	17%
Unexpected but not Accidental	36%	53%	51%	47%
Unplanned but not Unexpected	24%	16%	24%	19%
Planned	9%	21%	10%	15%
$n =$	115	221	79	424

Note: N refers to total number of pregnancies

