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Not Ready to Fill His Father's Shoes

A Masculinist Discourse of Abortion

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Many men report a profound experience associated with the abortion of a fetus they coconceived. Yet the meanings of abortion for men remain underinvestigated. Using data from in-depth interviews with twenty men involved in thirty abortions, this article explicates a masculinist discourse of abortion. By examining how men account for the process of deciding to terminate an unintended pregnancy and the meanings of the experience, this article demonstrates how the abortion experience is bound by men's understandings of competent fatherhood and dominant meanings of masculinity. In accounting for the decision to terminate the pregnancy, men consider their relative desire to reproduce themselves, their evaluation of self in relation to idealized fatherhood, and whether they feel ready to take on the role of the provider and head of household. Taken together, these narratives reveal the cultural dominance of narrowly defined expectations of fatherhood and how men articulate a desire for traditional family formation.

Keywords: *men; abortion; responsibility; reproduction; fatherhood; masculinity*

There are approximately sixty-two million women of reproductive age living in the United States. While approximately six million become pregnant each year, about half of those pregnancies are unintended (Alan Guttmacher Institute 2004). In turn, half of these unintended pregnancies are terminated by abortion (Alan Guttmacher Institute 1999). Although women from a wide range of socioeconomic, racial, religious, marital, and childbearing backgrounds seek abortions, abortion remains controversial. A portion of this controversy swirls around questions of what the appropriate role should be for men who coconceive.

This article unpacks this issue by examining how men faced with unintended pregnancies that culminated in elective abortions articulate their desired outcomes and account for their decisions to terminate the pregnancies. In doing so, I expose

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how men's narratives reveal the ways that reproductive decisions reflect their gendered social selves. Arendell (1992) argues in her own research on men's narratives of divorce that "how men define their situations and act in divorce points to their positions in a gender-structured society and to their understandings of the nature of social practices, relationships, and selves" (p. 152). From this, Arendell provides a rich examination of "a masculinist discourse of divorce" in which the men interviewed "shared a set of dispositions, practices, and explanations with which they managed their identities, situations, and emotional lives" (ibid., 153).

Lupton and Barclay (1997), in their study of discourses of fatherhood, argue that "the discourses available at a certain historical moment construct the ways we think or talk about, or respond to, phenomena. As such, they are both enabling and constraining human action and notions of reality. Discourses may be regarded as assemblages of knowledges that serve to produce notions of the human subject" (p. 5). From this orientation, Lupton and Barclay argue that the meanings of fatherhood are best understood by examining the discourses used to represent it. Following the example of these authors, this article explicates a masculinist discourse of abortion.

Using data collected during in-depth interviews with twenty men involved in thirty abortions (of fetuses they coconceived), this article looks at how men accounted for their own desired outcomes of unplanned pregnancies, the meaning of potential fatherhood for them, and the decision to terminate those pregnancies. Specifically, I show how men's narratives reflected their understandings of procreation as a chance to reproduce themselves and to satisfy their romantic notions of fatherhood, requiring their satisfaction of the role of the good provider and contingent on their desire to participate in a traditional male-headed nuclear family. To be clear, this article does not aim to capture the realities of the abortion experience but rather the discourses of abortion that—constructed and reshaped over time—reflect men's cultural understandings of pregnancy, abortion, and masculinity. In examining these narratives and men's efforts to retrospectively frame the abortion experience in terms of their conceptions of masculine competence, we can see the cultural dominance of narrowly defined fatherhood and how such constructions reify meanings of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) and of traditional notions of family formation.

Managing the Masculine Self

The concept of a masculine discourse presumes gender is socially constructed, with meanings that exist in and change between specific historical, social, and cultural contexts (Kimmel 1996). As Connell (1995) points out, individuals undertake "gender projects" to make sense of themselves as gendered beings (Armato and Marsiglio 2002). In doing so, individuals respond to and reinterpret cultural expectations of being gendered or of how to "do gender" (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Nowhere can this be seen as clearly as in the realm of social expectations of men around reproduction. Men frequently encounter messages calling for social and sexual responsibility around contraception (Blaney 1997; Hollos and Larsen 2004; Kaiser Family Foundation 1997; Oudshoorn 2004) and even childbirth participation (Mardorossian 2003). Most commonly, men have been able to establish themselves as competent in the realm of the family, as they achieve the role of the good provider (Bernard 1981).

More recently, competent fatherhood—particularly for unmarried men—has been equated with providing significant social and financial resources to their children (Curran and Abrams 2000; Dowd 2000; Jump and Haas 1987; Lamb 2000; Whitehead and Popenoe 1999). In reverse, male irresponsibility has been defined as male absence from their children's lives, failure to pay child support (embodied in the label *deadbeat dads*), and to some extent, presumed refusal to marry women who have become pregnant by them. Further defining incompetent fatherhood, a recent body of literature has attempted to connect male absence to poor life outcomes for children (Blankenhorn 1996; Comanor and Phillips 1998; Popenoe 1996). Taken together, these cultural expectations require competent fathers to be present, financially supportive, ideally married to the mother of their children and thus heterosexual, and a decisive force in the family. At the heart of definitions of competent fatherhood are meanings of competent masculinity (Holland and Scourfield 2000; Oudshoorn 2004; Reich 2005).

Even as the expectations and definitions of fathers may vary by race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or age, the cultural meanings and expectations of fatherhood and masculinity remain entwined. Illustrating this enmeshment, the National Fatherhood Initiative (2004), a national resource center developed in 1994 in conjunction with governmental officials, advertises in its national public service campaigns that "It takes a man to be a dad."[1]

Literature on Men and Abortion

Little is known about how men make sense of abortion in their lives, since the body of academic writings on men and abortion is notably thin. Some research investigates opinions of who should have the right to decide pregnancy outcome (Embree 1998; Rosenwasser, Wright, and Barber 1987). Other research reports men's attitudes about abortion (Marsiglio and Shehan 1993; Miller 1994; Osborn and Silkey 1980) or perceptions of men's roles in contraception, reproduction, or pregnancy in general (Brindis et al. 1998; Edwards 1994; Grady et al. 1996; Marsiglio, Hutchinson, and Cohan 2001; Wegner et al. 1998). However, far less research has been conducted in the area of men's own experiences with abortion. A small body of research attempts to identify what roles men play in abortion, including when they are informed about unintended pregnancy and abortion (Henshaw and

Kost 1992), which characteristics among men and women predict abortion (Zavodny 2001), and how men affect decisions regarding pregnancy outcome (Evans 2001; Kero et al. 1999). Illustrating the salience of cultural views about male responsibility, research has shown that adolescent and adult males identify responsibility as central to definitions of masculinity and that abortion may be an expression of responsibility (Kero and Lalos 2000; Marcell, Raine, and Eyre 2003). However, even as men articulate the importance of responsibility and may internalize expectations to behave responsibly, it is not clear how that value is actualized in pregnancy prevention or abortion decisions.

Outside this broad and ill-defined view of responsibility, few studies explore how men feel about their unintended pregnancies and abortions or construct meaning around them. Those that do often draw on data collected in interviews or surveys of nonrandomly sampled men, largely from abortion clinic waiting rooms (Holmberg and Wahlberg 2000; Kero and Lalos 2004; Shostak 1987; Shostak, McLouth, and Seng 1990; Wade 1978) or a men's counseling group that met during the partners' abortion procedures (Gordon and Kilpatrick 1977). Because of sampling, these studies inevitably overrepresent the perspectives of those most engaged in their relationships and do not reflect the majority of abortions. One recent study found that only 22 to 25 percent of women came to or left the abortion procedure with the man by whom they became pregnant (Beenhakker et al. 2004). Thus, not enough is known of the men who did not accompany partners, including those informed of the pregnancy only after its termination. Furthermore, virtually no studies evaluate men's constructions of meaning of the abortion experience later in life[2] or evaluate how the experience informs their sense of self. This research begins to address this void.

Method

This research analyzes the narrative accounts of thirty abortion stories collected from twenty different men during in-depth, one-on-one interviews. Multiple abortion experiences of the same man are sometimes referenced independently of each other, since the men referenced them as separate experiences and in all but two cases, had conceived with different women. In presenting these separate events, I am able to demonstrate how the experiences are not only different between men but also between relationships involving the same man.[3]

Participants were recruited through advertisements in two California regional newspapers—one daily and one free weekly—that ran for approximately two weeks, through flyers placed around a large public university campus and the surrounding communities, and through snowball sampling techniques. Participants were recruited "to share your personal experiences with abortion" with an understanding that data were for a research study. In all, thirty men volunteered; eight were excluded after they disclosed that although they felt they had faced the prospect of dealing with an

unplanned pregnancy, they eventually learned that the woman had not actually been pregnant, while two others did not attend interview appointments. As such, twenty interviews were completed.

Interviews were conducted in comfortable private or semiprivate locations suggested by participants. Interviews were guided by an interview schedule that asked men about their past and present romantic or sexual relationships; context and detail of any pregnancies in which they were involved; the details surrounding the abortion(s), including how the pregnancy occurred and how the decision to terminate the pregnancy was reached; how they felt, looking back, about the abortion, including what they wished had gone differently; and how they felt the abortion had affected their lives. Interviews lasted between forty minutes and three hours. Interviews with fourteen of the twenty men were tape-recorded, while six involved detailed note taking. These latter interviews were not taped in three situations because the men asked to be interviewed immediately when equipment was unavailable and were unable or unwilling to reschedule for a future time. In another three situations, the men requested that the interviews be untaped. These informal interviews, which followed the same format as the tape-recorded interviews, were included because they yielded information that otherwise might not have been available and allowed respondents to feel comfortable participating (Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001; Weiss 1994).

Taped interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts and notes of untaped interviews were analyzed using the concepts of what Charmaz (2002) has called "constructivist grounded theory method," where data are collected and analyzed "to learn participants' implicit meanings of their experiences to build a conceptual analysis of them" (p. 678). The original study goal was, in a general sense, designed to better understand the experiences of men whose partners had sought an elective abortion. As such, the use of open-ended questions allowed participants to articulate their own narratives and most important experiences. Interviews were transcribed immediately after the interviews and coded for emerging themes, with data collection ongoing. With additional data, codes were refined to better represent the emerging themes. The author and a research assistant separately coded all transcripts. Differences in coding were discussed until both coders agreed on an appropriate code for the data. All the men's stories contributed to this analysis; quotes are taken verbatim from transcriptions. Untaped interviews provided evidence of themes and patterns but are not excerpted.

All interviews were conducted by the author, a young white woman. A growing body of work provides reflexive analysis of qualitative data collection and suggests that gender informs the interactions between interviewer and participant, although it is unclear how it influences the information yielded (Arendell 1997; Behar and Gordon 1995; Krieger 1991; Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001). Schwalbe and Wolkimir suggest that the interview is an opportunity to signify masculinity "inasmuch as men can portray themselves as in control, powerful, autonomous and rational" while also a threat, as the interviewer maintains control, asks questions, and "does not simply

affirm a man's masculinity displays" (p. 91). These threats and opportunities are in effect a gendered interaction; as men are inevitably defining masculinity in their interviews, they do so in ways differently than they might for a male interviewer or an older researcher. Given that many of the men confided that they had never told anyone their abortion stories before or would never tell their male friends, I suspect that the cross-gender dynamic facilitated greater disclosure. Having said that, it is important to acknowledge that discussions of abortion, contraception, and reproduction can be sensitive. I believe that by providing the participants with a comfortable location and assurance of confidentiality, they disclosed honestly. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the interview is in itself a social interaction that affects how information is communicated (Hutchinson, Marsiglio, and Cohan 2002; Schwalbe and Wolkomir 2001).

Description of Participants

At the time of the interview, participants ranged in age from twenty to sixty-seven, with eight men between the ages of twenty and twenty-four, four men between twenty-six and thirty, seven men between thirty-four and forty-five, and one man of sixty-seven. All self-identified as heterosexual. Fifteen of the twenty men had never been married, two were married at the time of the interview, two were divorced, and one was both divorced and widowed. Only one participant—the sixty-seven-year-old man—had been married to the woman who had the abortion (they eventually divorced, and he went on to become twice widowed). Only one of the men interviewed (Tim, age twenty-four) was still involved with the woman who had the abortion, while only one participant (Carlos, age twenty-one) reported asking the woman who had the abortion if she objected to his participation in the interview (the two were no longer involved). Fifteen participants self-identified as white, three as Latino, and two as African American (including one who identified as biracial).

The men reflected a wide array of professions, including student (both graduate and undergraduate), homemaker, waiter, security guard, retail salesman, auto mechanic, security guard, drug treatment counselor, nightclub disk jockey, writer, self-employed, and retired. Thirteen of the twenty were raised with a religion; of those, eight reported that they are still religious, although four changed their religious affiliation sometime during their adult life (not reported as connected to any particular experience).[4] None self-identified as pro-life or antiabortion. Although several voiced general discomfort with abortion, none voiced a desire to see abortion outlawed or criminalized, and none reported involvement with any abortion-related organization. All the elective abortions were described as occurring in the first trimester and resulting from unintended pregnancies. Of the twenty men, six were involved with multiple abortions: one with five (Aaron, age twenty), one with three (Gary, age twenty-six), and four with two. Of those four, two of the men experienced

two abortions with the same woman (Tim, age twenty-four, and Patrick, age thirty-five). The other two men were involved with two abortions with two different women (Jon, age forty, and Brendan, age twenty-one). The men with three or more abortions reported that each was with a different woman. There was a wide range of time elapsed between abortions and interviews. The shortest time was approximately three months. The longest was more than thirty years.

The men described their desired pregnancy outcomes at the time as they remembered them, which was not necessarily indicative of how they made sense of the experience at the time. In three abortions, the men were not told about the pregnancy until after it was terminated. In five of the abortions, the men recalled wanting to see the pregnancy continue, even as some recalled having chosen to defer to the woman's decision. In ten abortions, the men described having made the decision, even as it required the woman to terminate the pregnancy when she was inclined to continue it. Sixteen abortions—the majority—involved men and women reaching mutual decisions or men describing a process of withholding their own preferences until the women were able to reach their own decisions and then deferring to those choices.[5]

Limitations of Sample

This study is not based on a random sample and thus is not generalizable. Because participation was voluntary, the men presumably applied some amount of significance to the abortions to motivate them to volunteer.[6] I do not wish to further a belief that most men whose partners have had abortions, with or without their knowledge, apply equal significance. However, studying the qualitative responses of these men offers unique insight into how men understand their role in an accidental pregnancy, the decision to terminate that pregnancy, and how such experiences intersect with dominant meanings of masculinity, particularly as constructed and narrated with temporal distance from the experience.

This study has the advantage of sampling men beyond the clinic waiting room and accessing men who are, in all but one case, no longer involved with the women who had been pregnant. At the same time, the men often had temporal distance from the experience and had shaped their sense of the pregnancy and accompanying relationship over time. This has the strength of providing narratives that are less emotionally laden than are those of men actively involved in the termination of the pregnancy. It is also limited by relying on men's more distant recollections that are more divorced emotionally from the experience. I did not interview couples and have no way of knowing how the men's accounts of events may differ or be similar to those of their partners. However, one of the aims of this study is to understand how men construct a narrative of the experience and to examine what discourses these narratives reflect. As such, their precise recollection of details or the ways their stories differ from those of their female partners are of less relevance.

Choosing or Not Choosing Fatherhood

In deciding what they wanted the outcome of the unplanned pregnancy to be, the men described a process of examining their own desire to become fathers or rather to take on the identity of father (and accompanying responsibilities). The men overwhelmingly discussed their own process of decision making in terms of their desire to satisfy the cultural expectations of competent fatherhood. In accounting for the decision to terminate an unplanned pregnancy, the men drew on several factors: their relative desire to reproduce themselves, their evaluation of self in relation to the image of idealized fatherhood, and whether they felt ready to take on the roles of the provider and head of household. The men also discussed the relative desirability or appropriateness of the pregnant woman in their imagined father-headed family. For the latter, the men evaluated the women who had become pregnant to assess whether they might be a good choice to mother their children or to serve as their counterpart in the family they envisioned heading.

Reproducing Himself

The occurrence of unintended pregnancy has its own meanings for men. A few of the men voiced the ability to conceive—or as one man described it, "siring a child"—as a sign of virility (Throsby and Gill 2004). Similarly, Gary, a twenty-six-year-old Latino hotel desk clerk responsible for three pregnancies that all ended in abortion, joked, "Maybe it's the Hispanic in me. I just want to have kids." He continued, "Unfortunately, I thought it was some sort of pride thing."

In reflecting on their preparedness to become fathers, many of the men articulated abstract projections of themselves in their imagined children. Some men described potential fatherhood as presenting a chance at immortality. For example, Patrick, a thirty-five-year-old white self-employed builder of custom furniture, described "procreation" as when "a part of yourself goes on to live in the future." Other men described fatherhood as offering a reflection of themselves. Such was the case for Jim, a white homemaker in his late forties with four children by three mothers. Jim is estranged from his first two children (now adults) who have one mother, is close to his college-age daughter from a second woman, and now married for a third time, is actively involved in raising his eight-year-old son from that marriage. Jim, who disagreed with a woman he dated between his second and third marriages when she opted to terminate an unintended pregnancy, explained his objection and how his view of abortion has changed since having children:

> Particularly if you've had kids, and I have, I think of what a reflection of your own life kids can be. You know, you look at yourself, you see yourself in your own kids, and once you've been able to experience that, then to make a decision that you're not going to [be a] father has a lot of misgivings.

Although Jim references the experience of having children as imbuing the abortion experience with particular meaning, men who had children were not the only ones to describe fatherhood as a reflection of themselves. For example, Aaron, a twenty-year-old childless black man who is a student and disk jockey and who had been involved in five abortions, explained that he could not help but think about "what it would be like to have a kid, a little Aaron running around."

Seeing oneself reproduced was an issue for the few men who articulated a desire to never have children. For example, Sam, a thirty-nine-year-old white graduate student, described his motivation to see his unintended pregnancy end in abortion and his desire to remain childless as in part stemming from his lack of desire to see a reflection of himself. He remarked, "I don't feel a need to have a little one of me running around and seeing myself in this child. I don't really want to see my faults, neuroses, and psychoses and bringing them up and putting them in my child, which I [would] do one way or another." Further demonstrating the understanding of fatherhood as a reproduction of self, the men interviewed overwhelmingly referred to the unborn fetus as a "he" or discussed what their sons would need. A few used gender-neutral terms. None envisioned the fetus as a "she."

Romantic Notions of Fatherhood

A second way the men described the process of deciding about pregnancy outcome reflected a belief that children promised to lend a greater meaning to one's life or to bring out one's best qualities. Twenty-nine-year-old Eric, a white auto mechanic, described wondering after the abortion "what it would be like to have a child. I get along great with kids. Everywhere I go, kids like me, and I don't know why because I'm an introvert, but with kids you sit down next to them—" Similarly, Carlos, a twenty-one-year-old Latino college student and café manager, noted, "I think I'll realize more why I was put here on earth when I become a parent, 'cause I love kids and I want to be a dad so bad, I think right now, more than anything, almost too much."

As these quotes illustrate, the men imagined children as potentially bringing out their best qualities or providing emotional fulfillment. Even though some of the men in this study imagined this emotional satisfaction, very few reported a process of evaluating their own emotional maturity or whether they would have time to participate in the day-to-day responsibilities of parenting, including providing or arranging child care, preparing meals, or dressing and bathing their children. Fatherhood appeared to be considered in abstract, romanticized ways. As Liss-Levinson (1981) asserts, "The traditional male sex role places a high value on external control and evaluation of behavior. Parenting is simply not reinforced by these means . . . While the role of father is certainly part of the traditional male image, the notion of parenting, or the actual caring for the child, is not part of the image" (p. 23). This does not necessarily mean that the men did not consider such issues but that discussing

these issues, which may reflect the "conduct of motherhood," was not part of the narrative they believed was most relevant (LaRossa 1995).

The men's assessment of their own readiness for fatherhood was closely related to their own romantic construction of fatherhood. As de Beauvoir (1952) wrote, "The life of the father has a mysterious prestige . . . It is through him that the family communicates with the rest of the world; he incarnates that immense, difficult and marvelous world of adventure; he personifies transcendence, he is God" (p. 27). The men in this study evaluated how they measured up to the mystique of fatherhood and whether they felt prepared to assume that identity. A key aspect of their constructions of fatherhood was a consideration of their abilities to be directly involved in activities with their imagined children. Most often, the men discussed their abilities to play sports, underscoring the centrality of sports and athletics to definitions of masculinity (McKay, Messner, and Sabo 2000; Messner 1987; Sabo 1998).

Men's readiness or reticence to become fathers who could participate in these activities shaped many respondents' desired pregnancy outcomes. Matt, a twenty-one-year-old white college student and nightshift security guard, explained, "[My father] was never the type where he'd coach me or get athletically involved, but I want to do that because I think that's pretty much how I became the person I am, through sports." Similarly, Alex, a twenty-four-year-old biracial doorman at a bar, explained "I got a boy [friend] whose dad's like only forty-eight now and he's twenty-five or twenty-six . . . and he goes skiing with him and shit and everything, you know. It's cool, like hanging with one of the fellas instead of being with someone's dad. And that would be cool."

Participants frequently described considering the reproductive histories of their own fathers in reaching their decisions. In these stories, the men both reflected on their own abilities to accomplish what they perceived their fathers did as men and also often voiced a desire to avoid their own fathers' mistakes, including having children early and in less than ideal relationships. For example, Alex recalled thinking as he left the abortion clinic about how his parents had gotten married because of an unplanned pregnancy. He explained, "That was the only drawback, when I thought about that. I guess I was the same age as my dad at the time. I thought, man, fuck that! I was a punk. Yeah, I think, I'm sure he could have had way more fun without me." Similarly, twenty-four-year-old Tim, a white college student, described his decision to persuade his girlfriend to have an abortion, referencing his own parents' failed marriage: "I didn't want to make the same mistakes my parents had . . . so I talked to her and basically, I was one-sided. There was no way I was going to have this baby." In pointing to the ways their own fathers failed, the men also constructed their idealized notions of the kinds of fathers they plan to be.

The men also drew on images of fathers as authoritative and in control in weighing their own willingness to assume the identity. Again, several men drew on stories of their own fathers. For example, Patrick's narrative included detailed accounts of his father's efforts to force him into law school so that he "would fill his shoes,

become part of the law firm." However, in characterizing his father, Patrick, thirty-five, described his father in terms of admiration and respect, explaining, "I have nothing but praise for him . . . he was a really great dad and I [could] count [on him] for emotional stability; what he has taught me has held me above water more than anything else." This description of his own father as both domineering and reliable is informative and taken together shapes Patrick's view of what he should become if he becomes a father. Later in the interview, as Patrick discussed his sadness about the two abortions with which he was involved (and had insisted on), he compared himself to the Old Testament's greatest patriarch, Abraham, and described his guilt about the abortions, explaining, "God says sacrifice your own son and he was gonna do it . . . and [my] pain was about taking my own child's life." In using such cultural imagery, both in his reverent descriptions of his own father—who had misunderstood his own son's interests—and then in his construction of the fetus as his child and himself as a fatherlike servant of God, Patrick reifies his image of fathers as omnipotent. Although Patrick's frame of reference was more dramatic than that of other men, several men drew on descriptions of their own fathers as wise, respected, or authoritative in their evaluation of their preparedness to become a father, an assessment made when facing an unintended pregnancy.

Role of the Provider

The majority of the men interviewed provided self-evaluations of their relative abilities to financially support a child or family in describing their own deliberations leading up to the abortion. In doing so, the men drew heavily on cultural expectations of competent masculinity as requiring men to be good providers (Bernard 1981; Coltrane 1998; Gerson 1997). As Bernard writes, "Success in the good-provider role came to define masculinity itself. The good provider had to win, to succeed, to dominate" (p. 240). Wally's description of his wife's abortion illustrates this dynamic. In discussing his wife's choice to terminate a pregnancy despite his objections, Wally, a sixty-seven-year-old white man and retired drug treatment counselor, provided great detail about how much he was earning at the time and how able he would have been to support that addition to the family, noting that "while we certainly hadn't planned on a third child so soon, financially we could hack it."

Several of the childless men defined their desire for children as contingent on reaching some future point when they would be able to financially support them. Twenty-one-year-old Carlos explained,

> I'm really looking forward to [fatherhood]. I want to be situated well enough so that I can give my kid all the tools he needs so he can have no limit to what he wants to do. I want to be financially stable, to provide, and have school behind me and hopefully be in the beginning stages of having my own restaurant or clothing store or something.

Similarly, twenty-year-old Aaron described the lifestyle he envisions living in ten years as "sitting back, counting my money [and] married." As he described his desire to see his girlfriend continue the pregnancy (the third unplanned pregnancy with a third woman), he described his financial stability as justification for that desire: "We were gonna get a place. I mean, I was working. I was making good money at the time and we were gonna raise our kid."

For Patrick, the desire to be both married and to be the primary breadwinner was intertwined. He explained that his girlfriend Liz "got pregnant and I knew that I didn't want to marry her, so ultimately I had to make the decision. I told her, 'I think it's best that since I cannot support you right now . . . and I don't want to marry you right now' [that you terminate the pregnancy]." Despite the fact that, according to Patrick, Liz had inherited a sizable amount of money and could have continued the pregnancy without needing financial support, Patrick nonetheless justified his unwillingness to marry her as due to his lack of income. In doing so, he reveals the salience of traditional meanings of competent masculinity as hinging on being a provider. Furthermore, this story shows how men like Patrick assume that reproduction should occur within marriage and that the perceived marriageability of the woman affects their understanding of pregnancy outcome. This issue is explored in greater detail in the following section.

Desiring a Male-Headed Family

A fourth way the men reflected on the meaning of the abortion experience and communicated their preference to see the pregnancy terminated was to describe their desire for a traditional nuclear family and to assess whether this pregnancy with this woman would facilitate that. Because almost all the men were unmarried at the time of the unplanned pregnancy, the possibility of continuing this pregnancy challenged this traditional vision of family. Illustrating this, Tim, twenty-four, explained,

> I've always wanted a paradigm family situation. I want to have one child, or children with one person. I want to be the breadwinner of the family. I want her to have motherly duties. I'm gonna have fatherly duties . . . I know it's paternalistic, it's macho. Whatever you want to call it, these are my feelings. And I want what I never had. I want a family.

Tim convinced his girlfriend to have two abortions after two unplanned pregnancies, in large part because of how those pregnancies interrupted his plans for the kind of family he wanted. At the time of the interview, more than two years after the first abortion, he was still dating her. Yet in narrating his strong preference to see both pregnancies terminated, Tim considered the kind of family he wants and whether his girlfriend would fit. Tim came to this position after his disappointment in having grown up with a single mother and having a father he only visited on weekends. It

is likely he wants what he called "a paradigm family situation" both because he would like to provide that to his future child and because such a family arrangement can guarantee ongoing access and contact with his children. Like Tim, almost none of the men interviewed described a situation in which they could envision sharing a child without also being the head of household in a heterosexual nuclear family, even though they may be motivated differently.

The men's articulated desire for a paradigmatic male-headed family also drew on perceptions of the women who had been pregnant. For the few men who described deeply loving the women, the abortion process reflected greater ambivalence. For example, Aaron refers to finding out that "a part of me was inside her" as significant. With another woman, Aaron recalls thinking a lot about "what the two of us created." Both quotes—drawing on experiences with different women in different pregnancies—illustrate how he thought of the fetus as a symbol of intimacy. This was not widespread.

More common, about one-third of the participants in this study described the women who had had the abortions as "obsessive," "possessive," "unstable," or unsuitable to mother what was often described as "my child." For example, twenty-four-year-old Alex reflected on his support for the abortion, explaining, "I didn't want the responsibility, and I'm not sure I wanted my kid with her. When you have a kid, you know what I mean, that's it. You have a child, you take care of it, you know; but I can't even take care of myself, and she infuriates me sometimes."

Similarly, Gary, twenty-six, described in negative terms the second woman who became pregnant by him and terminated the pregnancy. In articulating both the discomfort of the procedure itself and his difficulties engaging her emotionally, he explained that she was "very negative and always whining about something's wrong with her all the time and it was definitely, she was high maintenance and so that really, um, took away some of my sympathy at the time."

A large subset described the importance of having children with the right person and could describe their image of such a person. For example, Tim, the only man in the study still involved with the woman who had the abortions (two), described his uncertainty about whether to commit to Debra, his girlfriend of five years. In explaining why he insisted on both abortions, he explained, "I want a little family structure . . . That's what everyone dreams about, and I want my dreams to come true. And I think if I had a child with Debra it might mess, it might mess that up, because I'm not sure she's the perfect person."

The notion that the woman who had become pregnant was not "the perfect person" ran through many of the stories. Patrick, thirty-five, referring to his girlfriend of seven years, commented, "You know, [a college friend] warned me. He said, 'She's crazy. You should stay away from that girl. She's nuts.' [I said] 'I can handle it.' Sure, right. Well, it screwed up my life." In describing his decision to insist that she terminate the pregnancy and his own ambivalence about having done so, he contemplates, "Why did I want to, you know, take my own child? Why did I want to do

that? Well, [because] in having a child with Liz, that would be forever . . . I would always be a father to that child to a woman that I really wanted no part of." Although the first abortion with her was after the first year of the relationship, he continued his relationship with Liz for another six years. Patrick, like many men in this study, recast the woman who became pregnant in terms of moral failure or personal shortcoming. There is little doubt that this recasting occurred after the termination of the relationship and perhaps served to justify such an ending. It also occurred equally among the men, irrespective of whether they reported having wanted the pregnancy to continue or not. Furthermore, this rhetoric supports a cultural view that women who engage in nonmarital sex, particularly when they become pregnant or infected with a sexually transmitted disease, are morally tainted and as such are no longer motherly (Nack 2002; Reich 2005; Umansky 1998).

The narrative of the women as failed or inadequate also serves to portray the men's desire to be seen as competent. This can perhaps be seen most clearly in the men's comments about hypothetical future partners. Illustrating this connection, twenty-one-year-old Matt explained his choice to only have intercourse with women who could potentially be a significant partner: "I can't wait to have kids. It seems the older I get, the more moral I become . . . I don't pull the trigger unless the feeling is there." Thus, potential sexual partners are imagined as potential mothers, and in imagining their potential selves, the men draw heavily on the kinds of relationships and family forms they would like to achieve. Few men imagined a friendship with a woman in which they could share parenting without having a romantic relationship with the accompanying entitlements of head of household. The men who were best able to imagine such a relationship were most likely to have agreed mutually on abortion.

Conclusion

Unintended pregnancy and resulting abortion provide an important vantage point from which to examine how men conceptualize their masculine identities and what Marsiglio, Hutchinson, and Cohan (2001) term their "procreative selves." As men identify an embodied experience of reproduction postconception (and in fact in many cases do not learn of the pregnancy until after it is terminated), understanding abortion experiences requires examining cultural discourses of reproduction and fatherhood and the related dimensions of masculinity.

In this study, the men's narratives of their abortion experiences reflect aspects of hegemonic masculinity. First, the men often conceptualized reproduction as a chance to reproduce themselves, to gain immortality, or to bring out their best qualities. Second, the men relied on romantic cultural images of fatherhood, including the prescribed role of playing sports or being an authoritative figure. The men reflected on their own fathers' lives and procreative histories to construct their images of the

kinds of fathers they would like to be. Third, the men evaluated their relative ability to be a good provider in deciding whether they wanted to see the pregnancy continue. The men who felt they could provide were often frustrated that the pregnant woman chose to terminate the pregnancy. Other men imagined a future masculine self who was financially self-reliant and able to provide. Fourth, the men overwhelmingly communicated their desire to have a paradigmatic male-headed nuclear family. In establishing their desire for such a family form, they evaluated the woman who was pregnant and frequently suggested that she was not "the perfect one" or possessed traits that made her less than ideal to mother their children.

Taken together, these men's patterned narratives form a masculinist discourse of abortion. Revealed in such discourse is the way that men's reproductive decisions are heavily embedded in cultural definitions of heterosexual middle-class fatherhood. Of some surprise, there was little discernible difference between the men, irrespective of race, ethnicity, class, education level, or age. In part, this may be because of the limited size of the sample. Yet in part, it also likely reflects the dominant culture of fatherhood that defines competent masculinity in narrow terms. The men who in most cases planned to eventually become fathers hoped to be good ones. As the men's discourse reflected aspirational fatherhood, they used the same cultural terms of competent masculinity. There was little variation between men based on their desired pregnancy outcome, as they recounted it. This suggests that over time, the narratives the men deployed to account for the terminated pregnancy—even though they may have originally desired a different outcome—rely on the same available cultural scripts. Such scripts were deployed during the interview to construct a masculine self. Because this study does not utilize interviews with couples or dyads in the abortion and draws on men's recollections of the abortion experience, it is difficult to say whether these dynamics were as dominant in their decision-making experience at the time of the unintended pregnancy as the narratives would suggest. Nonetheless, the strong patterned narratives that represent this masculinist discourse explicate the significance and cultural accessibility of this discourse. Presumably, the men strived to provide their best presentation of self in their narratives. In doing so, they chose to use these tropes of competent masculinity. The use of this masculinist narrative does not preclude the very real possibility that there are more complex emotional processes occurring internally that were not fully revealed during the interview. In fact, the process of constructing a masculine self during an interview with a female researcher may limit a willingness to disclose the full range of emotions experienced. Irrespective of what emotions may or may not have been felt, what remains relevant is that as men travel through their social worlds and selectively disclose about their abortion experience, these are the narratives they put forth. Thus, these narratives represent the public understanding of men's experience of abortion.

Finally, there is great importance in understanding a masculine discourse of abortion. As policymakers, agencies, and public service campaigns aim to alter men's

reproductive and familial behavior, it is important to recognize the extent to which men have internalized such cultural messages and the ways they do and do not affect behavior. Without stronger understanding of the ways that men's behaviors are shaped by their own perceptions of masculinity and goals for their future masculine and paternal selves, such programs and campaigns will be ineffective.

Notes

1. It is worth noting that Wade Horn, past president of the National Fatherhood Initiative, left that post to accept one as assistant secretary for children and families in the Department of Health and Human Services in the Bush administration.

2. Kero and Lalos (2004) examined abortion experiences up to twelve months after the experience.

3. Given that this study did not collect data from the women in the abortion dyad, the context of relationships and how these relational issues shaped the abortion experience are not adequately explored here. This is a ripe area for future research.

4. Three respondents were raised Jewish, of which two still practice. One is Mormon, one is Baptist, and one identifies as Protestant. Three were raised Presbyterian; one still practices, one is now Episcopalian, and one reports exercising Eastern philosophy. One was raised Episcopalian and Baptist and only loosely identifies with either. Three were raised Catholic, of which two loosely still practice.

5. For a more detailed discussion of how these men accounted for the decision-making process, see Reich and Brindis (forthcoming).

6. Similar observations were made by Terry Arendell (1997), who conducted interviews with divorced men.

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