

Journal of Family Issues

<http://jfi.sagepub.com/>

Heterosexual Men and Parenthood Decision Making in South Africa: Attending to the Invisible Norm

Tracy Morison

Journal of Family Issues 2013 34: 1125 originally published online 11 April 2013

DOI: 10.1177/0192513X13484271

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://jfi.sagepub.com/content/34/8/1125>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Journal of Family Issues* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://jfi.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://jfi.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jul 16, 2013

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Apr 11, 2013

[What is This?](#)

Heterosexual Men and Parenthood Decision Making in South Africa: Attending to the Invisible Norm

Journal of Family Issues

34(8) 1125–1144

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0192513X13484271

jfi.sagepub.com



Tracy Morison¹

Abstract

This article reports on a qualitative study about male involvement in parenthood decision making (i.e., decisions related to becoming a first-time parent) in which the focus was on White, heterosexual men. Little is known about the roles and involvement of these men in decision-making processes. They comprise an invisible norm in research as heteronormative assumptions about parenthood cause them to be overlooked. This oversight—exacerbated by the pervasive problem perspective in social science—forms the research rationale. Conducted within a gender-relational framework, the study included 23 heterosexual, White South African women and men with a view to exploring how gender constructions influence this process and affect the gender power relations. Interviews with participants were analyzed using a narrative–discursive method and the findings show how an assumption of childbearing shaped the data and may have implications for female–male power relations in reproductive partnerships.

Keywords

reproductive decision making, heterosexuality, parenthood, narrative–discursive method

¹Rhodes University, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding Author:

Tracy Morison, Human Sciences Research Council/Rhodes University, Private Bag X41, Pretoria 0001, South Africa.

Email: TMorison@hsrc.ac.za

Introduction

Increased attention to the gendered dimensions of reproduction, including gender-based power, in the last 20 years has motivated the inclusion of men in reproductive research, policy, and programs (Browner, 2005; Figueroa-Perea, 2003; Shefer, 2012). Fathers have also received greater attention, as evidenced by the growing body of qualitative work on fatherhood conducted from a gender perspective (e.g., work in the United States by Marsiglio and colleagues—Marsiglio, 1995; Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb, 2004; Marsiglio, Hutchinson, & Cohan, 2000, 2001—and in South Africa by Morrell and colleagues—Morrell, 2005; Morrell & Richter, 2006). However, research that considers the interconnection between fatherhood and manhood often overlooks decision making *prior* to conception (or pathways to fatherhood). There has, therefore, been less critical exploration of male roles, gender dynamics, and accompanying politics preceding conception and fatherhood, including the gendered dimensions of heterosexual men's initial decisions related to fatherhood (Peterson & Jenni, 2003).

Heterosexual couples' decision-making processes about future parenthood are, in general, understudied (Rijken & Knijn, 2009)—for reasons I shall explain later. We do not have much of a sense of “*how* [these] people decide on having children—how much thought they gave it, if they consciously weighed costs and rewards, what dilemmas they have faced and how they deliberate to reach a decision” (Rijken & Knijn, 2009, p. 766). There is, however, a particular dearth of knowledge about the roles and involvement of men in these processes, especially those who are White,² heterosexual, fertile, and from the middle class. Those men, in other words, who could be deemed to epitomize the norm and who do not represent any special problem or challenge in sexual and reproductive health research. In this article, I turn the spotlight onto this group, which constitutes an “invisible norm” in reproductive research.³

The invisibility of this group, as I shall explain, is supported by heteronormative beliefs about childbearing and rearing as normal components of heterosexual adulthood (Mollen, 2006), with parenthood usually viewed as a prescribed stage of the heterosexual life course and even an essential characteristic of mature adulthood (Cooper et al., 2007;). Such widespread and taken-for-granted beliefs contribute to, what I have termed, a *heteronormative blind-spot* in reproductive research. This blind spot explains the exclusion of particular men from the research agenda and forms the backdrop and rationale for my own research.

The article begins with a discussion of this background, discussing the blind-spot in relation to the assumption that childbearing will inevitably

occur within heterosexual marriage, as well as how it is exacerbated by a pervasive problem perspective, which is particularly common to South African reproductive research. It is this context that motivated my exploration of the roles played by White South African men in the decisions related to becoming a first-time parent within heterosexual couples. My objective was to investigate how dynamic and changing constructions of gender—brought about by sociopolitical changes in the country in recent years—influence this process, as well as the potential implications for gender power relations. In this article, I report on some of the findings, showing how an assumption of future childbearing within married heterosexual couples shaped the data,⁴ as well as its potential impact on female–male power relations within reproductive partnerships.

The Assumption of “Automatic Childbearing” and the Heteronormative Blind-Spot in Reproductive Research

“Marriage means having children and forming your family, so what is the need of discussion?” (p. 196) stated one participant in Gipson and Hindin’s (2007) qualitative study on couple communication and negotiation of reproductive preferences. This quote illustrates the general view of having children as a natural and obvious occurrence for married heterosexuals (Meyers, 2001). Based on the construal of parenthood as inevitable, noncommunication and passive decision making appears to be normative, as Gipson and Hindin’s (2007) research shows. The view of childbearing as spontaneous, even automatic, is reinforced by popular, powerful cultural beliefs regarding passion, romance, and gender roles (Fennell, 2006); the familiarity of parenthood (as a commonplace occurrence); and the perception of limited potential costs (Fennell, 2006; Nauk 2007). Under such conditions, parenthood decisions are culturally framed in such a way that “further individual reasoning seems superficial” (Nauk, 2007, p. 618)—and the result is a common style of passive decision making (Fennell, 2006).

The widely held construction of parenthood as a nonchoice for heterosexuals and, particularly, the containment of the inevitability of childbearing within the marital partnership have rendered married heterosexuals—and their decision-making processes—invisible. This common view is, as I have already suggested, the root of the heteronormative blind-spot in reproductive research: the general failure to question or to critically consider the parenthood decision-making process of married heterosexuals, albeit passive for the majority (Donovan, 2000; Meyers, 2001).

Heterosexuals are usually only considered by researchers when choice and decision making are explicit issues, for instance, when people will not or

cannot have children without premeditation or biological intervention. Consequently, the heteronormative blind-spot in reproductive research is evident in two main trends pertaining to parenthood decision making. The first trend is the tendency to only explicitly consider the parenthood choices of those who do not fit into the normative category of married, fertile, heterosexuality. An example is the growing area of research on lesbian women's motherhood choices (e.g., Almack, 2006; Donovan, 2000; Ryan-Flood, 2005) and a smaller body of work that considers gay fatherhood choices (e.g., Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Mallon, 2004; Murphy, 2013; Rabun & Oswald, 2009). There is also a great deal of research on infertility (e.g., Dyer, Abrahams, Mokoena, & van der Spuy, 2004; Dyer, Mokoena, Maritz, & van der Spuy, 2008). For those in these two groups, parenthood is explicitly within the realm of choice since it requires conscious deliberation, overt discussion, and decisions regarding medical (or other) intervention or alternative paths to parenthood.

It is not simply those who struggle or those who are incapable of procreating who are subject to scrutiny, however. As Meyers (2001) points out, researchers have also trained their gaze on those who are deemed unfit to procreate. This may, for example, be due to poor health. For instance, one of the few South African studies to explicitly address parenthood decisions among heterosexual people is conducted with HIV-positive people (Cooper et al., 2007). It may also be because they are considered to be too young and/or are unmarried (see Macleod 2001, 2003, for a discussion).

The exception to this trend is research—conducted mostly from gender or feminist perspectives—that considers healthy, heterosexual women's motherhood decisions, often in relation to pronatalism and the salience of motherhood for feminine identities (e.g., Mollon, 2004; Sevón, 2005; see Meyers, 2001, for a review). Research on women's motherhood decision making may stem from the emphasis on choice in feminist rhetoric, especially in relation to reproduction. Consequently, a number of studies also explore the *choice* to voluntarily forgo motherhood (Letherby, 2002). In contrast, studies that consider fatherhood decision making of fertile, heterosexual men are rare, particularly from the perspective of the men themselves (Rijken & Knijn, 2009).

The second trend that reflects the heteronormative blind-spot in reproductive research is research on the transition to parenthood (e.g., Draper, 2003; Henwood & Procter, 2003; Knoester & Eggebeen, 2006). The inclination in this research area is toward the uncritical treatment of parenthood as a phase in the "normal" heterosexual life course, as a milestone or rite of passage. Although the focus in this research tradition is on biological procreation within heterosexual couples, the normative expectations of parenthood within the "normal" life trajectory are not really problematized. Furthermore, the

tendency in work that explores the impact of the “transition” to fatherhood on heterosexual men and their partners is to consider those who are *already* fathers (Marsiglio et al., 2000; Peterson & Jenni, 2003). The same can be said for the discipline of gender studies where fatherhood has increasingly become a popular topic, while parenthood decisions and heterosexual men’s role in these are generally overlooked (e.g., Morrell & Richter, 2006). There is, as I have stated, therefore, a particular gap in relation to fertile, heterosexual men’s parenthood decision making *prior to conception* and fatherhood (Marsiglio, Lohan, & Culley, this issue; Peterson & Jenni, 2003) stemming from the heteronormative blind-spot. This oversight has been exacerbated by the pervasive problem perspective, which I turn to next, particularly in South Africa where there is a paucity of research on the process by which healthy heterosexual people decide to become parents.

A Myopic Focus on “Problem” Men

The problem perspective is a legacy of demographic and traditional family planning research, which generally aimed to facilitate increased female contraceptive usage. The focus was on women’s fertility and men were considered as “impregnators” or as barriers to women’s contraceptive use (Greene & Biddlecom, 2000). This narrow, instrumentalist view persists in many studies of male “roles,” despite recent attempts to recognize that men may be constructively engaged in reproductive issues (Browner, 2005). This persistence is largely due to social concerns, which influence funders and drive research agendas in reproductive health research. In South Africa, research is frequently related to social problems, such as teenage pregnancy, HIV prevention practices, and violence in the context of sex and reproduction (e.g., Jewkes, Dunkle, Nduna, & Shai, 2010; Morrell, Bhana, & Shefer, 2012; Stern, Peacock, & Alexander, 2009; Swartz & Bhana, 2009). A significant contributing factor has been the HIV pandemic, especially in developing countries like South Africa, where research is driven by the imperatives of HIV together with the challenges of violence against women (Shefer, 2012).

What’s more, the problem perspective tends to be racialized, which compounds the oversight of certain men. South African research frequently concentrates on men who are considered to present a “high-risk” problem, predominantly those who are Black and poor. In fact, in response to this tendency, some have claimed that Black men have been “othered,” even “demonized,” in sexual and reproductive research (Shefer, 2012). In contrast, White economically advantaged men appear to constitute an invisible norm. Some researchers acknowledge this oversight but justify the focus on Black men’s experiences on the basis of their representativity of the general population

Table 1. Breakdown of Sample According to Age and Gender.

Cohort	Gender	Number of participants
>40 years	Male	6
	Female	5
21 to \pm 30 years	Female	6
	Male	6
Total		23

(e.g., Swartz & Bhana, 2009). Nevertheless, this consistent failure to address the minority experience may inadvertently reiterate Whiteness as the invisible norm. To avoid this, and to direct attention to those who have previously been overlooked, my research focused on White South African heterosexual men's involvement in decision making to become parents in the heterosexual couple context.

Method

The study was framed by a gendered and relational perspective in order to take into account the interplay between women's and men's roles rather than focusing on men's (or women's) perspectives alone. This perspective allows researchers to consider decision making as a gender relational process (rather than isolated events for men and women) in which each partner within a reproductive partnership affects, and is affected by, the process (Figueroa-Perea, 2003). In this manner, we are able to move beyond the simplistic consideration of men only as women's partners who affect women's sexual and reproductive choices, and invariably in negative ways (Figueroa-Perea, 2003). Accordingly, women were also interviewed from their perspective as men's partners, enriching the account significantly and providing a balanced view regarding the decision making associated with deciding on whether to have children.

Participants

Data were drawn from narrative interviews with 23 White participants who identified as heterosexual and middle-class (as determined by occupation and educational background). The group consisted of two age cohorts, each composed of both women and men, as Table 1 shows.

The first cohort included parents who were past childbearing age (around 40 years old⁵). Their children ranged in age from primary school to young adults and there was no wish for more children. The women and men in this

group were not partners from the *same* couple since this had aroused participants' concerns regarding confidentiality. People felt that they might be compelled to share with one another what they would say or had said.⁶

The second cohort consisted of unmarried 21- to 30-year-olds who never had children. Half of the younger men in this group expressed a definite desire to have children. The others were mostly undecided or ambivalent (i.e., they had some reservations or conditions), while Franco expressed reluctance to have children at all. All the younger women, except Petro, expressed the desire to become parents. The demographic particulars for both cohorts appear in Table 2.

Collecting "Stories" of Parenthood Decision Making

Narrative interviews were conducted with each of the participants. Participants from the first cohort were asked to reflect on their experiences of becoming a parent, while those in the second cohort were asked to relate their ideas and future plans about parenthood. The younger people's prospective narratives differ from the older participants' retrospective accounts in terms of the interdependence of the account and the actual experiences referred to. Yet this does not mean that the younger participants were freely able to construct their personal narratives, since they were constrained by established understandings and cultural narratives regarding adulthood, the heterosexual life-course, and other meanings at play in the wider sociocultural milieu (Taylor & Littleton, 2006). As the findings show, participants had to negotiate certain preexisting, entrenched positions and scripts in relation to childbearing.

The Narrative–Discursive Analytical Approach

The interviews from the two age cohorts formed two data sets. These were treated as narratives-in-interaction co/produced within the interview context. The method used was Taylor and Littleton's (2006) narrative–discursive method into which Butlerian performativity theory was infused. This method arises from a synthesis of discursive methods with narrative theory. It investigates the ways that narratives are simultaneously enabled and restricted by the prevailing meanings within specific sociocultural contexts, exploring how "available meanings are taken up or resisted and (re)negotiated" (Taylor & Littleton, 2006, p. 23) via positioning analysis. The incorporation of performativity theory made it possible to attend to the politics of narration beyond the interactional context (the interview), broadening the analytical scope to include the reiteration and troubling of gender norms. (See Morison & Macleod, in press, for a fuller explication.)

Table 2. Demographic Particulars.

Pseudonym	Age	Relationship status	Occupation	Highest educational level
Cohort 1 (>40 years)^a				
André	42	Married	Farmer and HR consultant	Tertiary
Annelie	49	Widowed	Legal administrator	Secondary
Elias	43	Married	Police officer	Secondary
Esmé	53	Remarried	Educator/teacher	Tertiary
Gerhardt	46	Married	IT technician	Tertiary
Ilze	50	Married	Self-employed	Tertiary
Koos	48	Married	Self-employed	Tertiary
Lettie	53	Married	Homemaker	Tertiary
Maria	39	Married	Administrator and trainer	Tertiary
Stefanus	59	Divorced	Retired church minister	Secondary
Susan	39	Married	Senior clerk	Secondary
Thuis	41	Married	Teacher	Tertiary
Cohort 2 (21 to approximately 30 years)^b				
Anel	21	Dating	Postgraduate student	Tertiary
Dalena	22	Dating	Undergraduate student	Tertiary
Dawid	32	Single	Lecturer	Tertiary
Elize	22	Dating	Office administrator	Secondary
Franco	32	Single	Clinical psychologist	Tertiary
Jakobus	21	Single	Undergraduate student	Tertiary
Johann	29	Engaged	Salesperson	Secondary
Mariska	25	Dating	Postgraduate student	Tertiary
Petro	32	Single	Child psychologist	Tertiary
Riaan	25	Single	Postgraduate student	Tertiary
Wouter	28	Dating	Medical doctor	Tertiary

a. Cohort 1 average age: 46.5 years (men), 49.1 years (women), 46.7 years (all). Age range: 41-59 years (men), 39-53 years (women), 39-59 years (all).

b. Cohort 2: Average ages 24 years (men) and 24.4 (women). Age range: 21-32 years.

Analysis entails the identification of the discursive resources⁷ that are drawn on and the subject positions they offer (as in discourse analysis). This involves searching for common elements across a series of interviews and across different points in a particular interview. The analyst also explores rhetorical or identity work—that is, how resources are mobilized to achieve a particular situated discursive purpose and re/negotiate interactively useful positions within particular interactions. A central element of this analytical task is attending to interactional “trouble” that may occur due to inconsistency, contradiction, potential challenges from the audience, or being aligned with socially undesirable positions. The analyst therefore considers the work accomplished by the particular resource and possible trouble that it may give rise to (Taylor & Littleton, 2006), as well as attending to the process of “repair.” Repair comprises various discursive tactics or rhetorical and positioning strategies, like the use of rhetoric, argumentation, or “saving face” (Morison & Macleod, *in press*).

Results

Participants had difficulty talking about male involvement in parenthood decision making. For them, this appeared to be a “nontopic,” since the very notion of “decision making” was for the most part alien. Hence, the overarching feature of the data is the participants’ general silence around the main problematic. Instead, participants consistently reframed childbearing as a nonchoice. This rhetorical strategy was underpinned by the assumption of spontaneous or automatic childbearing, discussed earlier, as the following excerpts illustrate.

I always wanted [children] and I also never had this thing of “What if I can’t have?” Those things didn’t come up in my mind. . . . No, I never, I just knew I will have [children]. (Maria, 39, mother of two)

Now, I’ve got engaged and I’m getting married, that’s the next step. The norm is the very next step would be to have kids, but I’m not gonna. My very next step is not gonna be kids (.) It’s gonna be to get everything ready for BEFORE that happens. (Johann, 29, “nonparent”)

Claims, like Maria’s were common and are indicative of the unquestioned assumption of the inevitability of parenthood. Parenthood, as Johann’s comment quoted above shows, was frequently presented as a normal stage in the heterosexual life trajectory, following on from marriage, and most participants assumed that they could and would become biological parents once married. In

fact, like Maria, all the parent participants claimed that the possibility of not having children, or even being unable to have children, had neither occurred to them nor been discussed with their partners. Parenthood was therefore construed as self-evident and as a foregone conclusion made well before adulthood. This may lead us to question the autonomy of such a “decision” (Meyers, 2001). Indeed, the matter of *whether* to have children was not really a matter for discussion and parenthood was deemed largely an issue of timing, as Johann’s statements about readiness show. The taken-for-granted nature of parenthood made it difficult for most of the participants to tell their “story” of becoming a parent, especially in terms of choice, as I shall discuss next.

An Unusual Conversational Move

Given the taken for granted nature of parenthood, it might have appeared strange to question the “normal” behavior expected of married heterosexual people, amounting to “an unusual conversational move” (Reynolds & Taylor, 2004, p. 203). Yet as Poland and Pederson (1998) assert, “What goes without saying can be of the greatest interest to [those] who seek to better understand that which is taken for granted and its impact on social relations” (p. 306)—in this instance, the gender power relations in heterosexual reproductive partnerships. My unusual conversational move is made explicit in the following extract where Ilze responds to my request to tell her “story” of becoming a parent.

Ilze: Ja, but what STORY, what do you mean by “STORY”?

TM: Well, I suppose like, um, kind of the story of how you came to be a parent (.) [. . .] So maybe you could tell me a bit more about [. . .] you not wanting kids in the first place and then how it came to be that you decided=

Ilze: =no, we didn’t decide to have [a child]; it just happened [Laughter]. [. . .] It comes from generation to generation. We do it the same way. We don’t even think about it. That’s why I said, I don’t know what you really want, we don’t talk about these things, it just happens. [Laughs]

TM: That’s interesting. Then, here comes this person and says, “Let’s talk about this.” What did you think?

Ilze: [Laughs] Ja, there’s nothing to talk about [laughs]. It just happens. (Ilze, 50, mother of one)

Ilze’s somewhat bewildered response highlights my framing of childbearing as entailing conscious deliberation by an autonomous individual who actively

chooses according to self-interest. Instead, she introduces an alternative ideal of a spontaneous, nonverbal process. This passive decision-making style, discussed earlier, entails a lack of deliberate and rational planning and discussion where matters are largely left to chance (Fennell, 2006). Based on this construction, Ilze claims that “there is nothing to talk about.” Her inability to formulate a “story,” therefore, is not just related to her personal biography but rather to the unlikelihood of *any* married person to consciously reflect on or to actively take a decision to become a parent. This position of normality is reinforced by reference to the Afrikaners (the “we” that Ilze refers to) who all “do it the same way.” Thus, by invoking the norm of childbearing as a spontaneous occurrence, the lack of conscious reflection is justified, passive decision making is rendered normative, and the issue is ultimately rendered a nontopic (“there’s nothing to talk about”).

Responses like Ilze’s direct questioning and challenging of the framing of the topic as an explicit process related to a conscious choices were rare, but when they did occur they alerted me to the incongruous understandings held by my participants and I. The few occasions where participants spoke out helped me to make sense of the participants’ relative silence on the topic, silence that was manifest in their “avoidance, denial, deflection, reframing, and intellectualizing” (Mazzei, 2003, p. 363). Such responses not only disguised their inability to discuss the issue at hand (on my terms), but, importantly, reinforced procreative heteronormativity, as I shall show.

Hence, my unusual conversational move, particularly when it involved direct questioning of the taken-for-granted, helped highlight the participants’ assumptions and allowed me to illuminate the normative frameworks underpinning their silence on the issue, as well as to “listen” to these silences (Mazzei, 2003). Of course, as I have indicated, such overt expressions of bewilderment, requests for clarification, or explicit disavowals of planning were not the norm. More common were indirect challenges of the construction of parenthood decision making entailing active choice and deliberation. Such challenges were resourced by powerful counter narratives that allowed for the reframing of topic in such a way that it was removed from the realm of choice, as explicated in the following section.

Reframing: Removing Parenthood From the Realm of Choice

The language of choice, which framed the enquiry, acted as a constraint on narration that had to be negotiated by respondents. Notions of “family planning” and “reproductive decision making” originate in policy and scholarly discourses and have been granted broader social currency through international efforts at population control, especially in “developing” contexts like

South Africa. The discourse of choice is consequently also associated with rationality, maturity, and responsibility, with nonadherents potentially positioned as selfish or bad citizens or parents, who fail to consider the interests and needs of society of their future children. Accordingly, the discourse of choice was not easily ignored, particularly by older participants who were bound by the facticity of their actual biographies.

Interestingly, though the younger participants were not similarly constrained, they did not often articulate their narratives in the language of choice; though it was interactively useful and allowed them to fashion socially desirable positions. For the most part, however, they contested the notion of choice and reframed the topic in ways that served to justify childbearing as spontaneous and inevitable.

Thus, the expert discursive resources of family planning and reproductive choice, despite their relative power, did not necessarily resonate with participants' own experiences or ideals. Instead, the participants drew on discursive resources that actively discourage rational or calculated action with regard to procreation, including couple communication and collaboration. Most notable were two central and interconnected discursive resources, namely, (a) the romance/love script and (b) the canonical couple narrative. These ways of speaking are informed by a complex array of sociocultural norms about passion, romantic love, and gender roles (Fennell, 2006) and were further reinforced by biologized constructions of parenthood; each of these three discursive resources is discussed in turn below.

Romance/Love Script. This script of romantic love allowed participants to re/present passive decision making or nonplanning as positive and desirable rather than associating it with irresponsibility or immaturity. For instance, common descriptions of childbearing as "the culmination of [a couple's] love for each other" and "the supreme result of our undying love" (Jakobus) served to construct having children as a spontaneous overflow or sign of a couple's love. This romantic scenario was considered to be diminished by active planning/choosing, as shown in the following quote.

I hope this is how it goes: that the longer you are with someone the deeper your love for that person grows, and I want then my kiddies to be a result of that love. I want to come to a place where I can't express my love for the woman any more. [. . .] so then my child should be an overflow of my love for my partner. [. . .]. I definitely think it's something that can be negotiated, although that takes me very far away from my romantic scenario. [Laughter] Let's negotiate a baby like a car deal or something. [. . .] If it just happens in the more romantic way then my love for the child is true and I wouldn't mind making any sacrifice for the child or the relationship or the woman. (Franco, 32, childfree)

This extract shows how the romance/love script featured as a counter narrative that allowed for the negotiation of alternative positive positions (e.g., selfless, altruistic) and the denigration of active planning and the family planning script. The latter was achieved by juxtaposing active decision making with the script of romantic love, for instance, describing family planning as “scientific” (Lettie, Thuis), “mechanical” (Lettie), or even ludicrous, as when André joked: “I cannot recall that we sat down and we had like a spread sheet and we said, ‘Right, is the house big enough?’” Such negative references about active planning were common—as Rijken and Knijn (2009) also report. The romance/love script therefore allowed participants to talk against the family planning model and, in many cases, to reframe passive or nonplanning as a positive and desirable (particularly for those who were older), thereby ultimately justifying the norm of childbearing.

The extract shown above also shows the centrality of the married heterosexual couple to the love/romance script. Marriage was usually seen as the appropriate context in which reproductive matters could largely be left to chance, without deliberate or rational planning and discussion. It is possible to see, therefore, that this discursive resource is intertwined and overlaps with the canonical couple narrative. These discursive resources both centre on heterosexual coupledness and are mutually reinforcing. The canonical couple narrative, which I discuss next, differs in terms of its explicit stipulation a particular normative sequence of events according to expected developmental stages, including parenthood, thus functioning as a canonical narrative.⁸

The Canonical Couple Narrative and Parenthood as “a Natural Progression”. The canonical couple narrative provided speakers with the well-established and recognizable heteronormative cultural storyline “of love, courtship, marriage, parenthood and continuing coupledness” (Reynolds & Taylor, 2004, p. 199) for their own stories. This canonical narrative is based on the assumption that a “normal” life progresses logically toward maturity following universal stages associated with heterosexual coupledness and family. Participants therefore frequently referred to the “progression,” “stages,” and “steps” of their unfolding lives. This can be seen in extract by Johann (as listed earlier) and is also illustrated by Maria’s comment: “you go through stages: [first] it’s 21sts, then it’s engagement parties, then it’s weddings, and kitchen teas and then it’s stork teas.” As these comments show, the “stages” were usually designated as courtship, early marriage or “newlyweds,” parenthood, family with adolescents, “empty nest,” retirement, and old age.

Such talk is informed by a developmental model of identity derived from psychological understandings of the heterosexual life span (Reynolds & Taylor, 2004; Taylor & Littleton, 2006), which usually “include childbearing

and rearing as normal components of adulthood” (Mollen, 2006, p. 280). These understandings have saturated popular discourse, becoming a common-sense resource for speakers to re-cite (Reynolds & Taylor, 2004), lending them a recognizable naturalness (Reynolds & Taylor, 2004). This enabled a particular discursive tactic in which participants, like the men in Lupton and Barclay’s study (1997), constructed parenthood as part of a “natural progression,” as seen in the extract below.

If you’re married and you’ve got a settled job and stuff, for me, it’s sort of a—it’s probably the way I’ve grown up and stuff—it’s sort of like a natural progression, that at some stage, someone . . . is going to want to have a child. (Riaan, 25, “nonparent”)

This discursive tactic served to remove parenthood from the realm of choice and allowed speakers to negotiate an alternative, relatively powerful, positive position of normality. The frequent emphasis on the “naturalness” of parenthood was therefore explicitly related to its expected and accepted place in the heterosexual life course rather than of an instinctive or innate capacity. Although biologized constructions of reproduction as natural were also drawn on to bolster this talk, as I show next.

Biologized Renditions of Parenthood. Constructions of childbearing as a biologically based, “natural thing” (Koos) and a matter in which “Nature [takes] its course” (Maria) worked in tandem with the aforementioned scripts to reinforce procreative heterosexuality, that is, the normalization of parenthood as a natural consequence of being a heterosexual woman or man through the regulative discourses around gender (Meyers, 2001). This line of reasoning also functioned as justification of the failure to reflect on becoming a parent, especially where men were concerned. Women were frequently aligned with nature and positioned as not only more interested in, but also responsible for, reproductive matters, particularly with regard to contraception. For example:

It’s not that we sit and say, “OK this is how it happens and on day this you [do] this,” because we also didn’t have problems so it was very natural. [. . .] We didn’t even (.) this is very personal, we didn’t even before we got married say, “Okay, are you on the pill? Or are we using this?” (.) I think, how he understood it, is that it’s my responsibility [. . .] So we never sat and spoke about it, you know, the technical side of things. (Maria, 39, mother of two)

I think for me it was (.) it’s like (.) it’s a natural thing. If you get married then you have kids. It’s not that you decide “I want to be a dad.” You accept that that is the

life. You grow up, do whatever studies you want to do, then you get a partner somehow and get married eventually and then you start with the family. That is natural, so there's no decision. [. . .] I assume we discussed it . . . because she used contraceptives then and she stopped using it. So it's not like there was a slip up and she got pregnant or something . . . [It was] planned in the sense of we would like to have a child, stop that [contraception] and it actually happened very quickly. (Koos, 48, father of four)

Lena was actually not planned. [. . .] although we were then ready for kids. It's not that we put it off, we were ready and Trudy obviously went off the pill, things like that, and, ja, Lena was conceived. [. . .] And then Lena came without us even talking about it, because I was (.) well, we DID plan it and Trudy went off, as you said, she went off the pill. (Elias, 43, father of two)

As the extracts above show, having children was depicted as a “natural” process (by both women and men), largely in the hands of women. They also illustrate how many of the participants negotiated the construction of active decision making. Both Koos and Elias arrive at a definition of “planning” that is passive (with little or no direct communication), but one still allows them to construct an account in which the child's birth is not unintended. It is also possible to see the common positioning of men as largely inactive in the already passive pathway to parenthood and rely on their partner to take care of contraceptive matters. Thus, emphasis on the naturalness of childbearing—both in terms of the heterosexual life-span and as a biologically driven phenomenon—removed childbearing from the realm of choice.

Collectively, these ways of speaking support the construction of childbearing as tied to biological reproduction, which is allowed to occur spontaneously within the context of marriage, and ultimately supports and reiterates procreative heteronormativity, because it is only within the heterosexual couple context where reproduction can be entirely left to chance.

Conclusion

The research presented in this article sought to turn the spotlight on an invisible norm in reproductive research by investigating how male involvement in the processes and decisions related to parenthood was envisaged by White Afrikaners, how this was affected by gender constructions, and the implications that this might have for gender power dynamics. The focus of this article has been on direct questions about the accepted and taken-for-granted norm—that is, questioning heterosexuals about their pathways to parenthood and, specifically, about men's participation in these. This questioning created an unusual conversational move and acted as a source of trouble for narrators,

because it was curious to have to answer questions about “normal” and expected behavior and to have to account for what usually goes unreflected on. However, this trouble was useful because it highlighted the norm of procreative heteronormativity, which underpinned what usually goes unspoken, and is perhaps even unspeakable.

In this article, I have shown how participants’ responses defended the norm of expected childbearing among heterosexuals, thereby effectively reinstating the norm of procreative heteronormativity. This occurred as participants discursively shifted the terms of the interview conversation away from notions of choice (introduced by talk of family planning and reproductive decision making). As pointed out, this rhetorical work occurred even among younger participants who, as “nonparents,” were not obliged to do so or constrained by their actual biographies. This finding points to the normative idealization of procreative heterosexuality.

Participants negotiated socially desirable positions within the rendition of a passive or automatic pathway to parenthood, notably by situating childbearing within the realm of romantic heterosexual coupledness. This discursive maneuvering was interactively useful in the immediate discursive context of the interview. The construction of childbearing as part of a more or less unconscious and spontaneous process of passive decision making helped justify participants’ lack of reflection on the topic. In addition, on the basis of this particular construction of a passive pathway to parenthood, the question of male involvement was rendered a nonissue and could be sidelined, allowing participants to remain silent on the issue. Instead, the process of becoming a parent was depicted as governed by popular norms and ideals of romance, passion, love, and, significantly, established gender roles. These patterns can be interpreted as potentially disguising the lack of collaboration and men’s relative passivity in decisions around parenthood.

The point of a discursive investigation such as this is not, of course, to pass judgment on the ways that parenthood decision making is understood or undertaken. Rather, it is the effects of dominant understandings, such as those discussed in this article, which is of interest, particularly as they pertain to gender relations within heterosexual reproductive partnerships. The participants’ persistent reiteration and idealization of the construction of heterosexual parenthood as a natural, pre-given life phase amounts to a defense of the status quo, justifying traditional gender norms and potentially entrenching existing power disparities that overshadow heterosexual relationships (Meyers, 2001). Moreover, since these roles were never explicitly acknowledged or stated, they remain hidden and potentially unchallenged. Based on these findings, it is important for researchers to be aware of the taken-for-granted and silences that surround the issue of parenthood decisions, both in

the research endeavor and more generally. Careful questioning of participants—within the parameters of ethical respect for participants’ boundaries—can circumvent silences created through unspoken norms, as this research has illustrated by showing the usefulness of the unusual conversational move to highlight such norms.

Acknowledgment

Thanks to Vasu Reddy and the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments and suggestions.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by funding from Rhodes University and the National Research Foundation.

Notes

1. This term refers to the initial undertaking toward becoming parents, which includes associated decision making (e.g., timing, ideal conditions, and family size and composition). This process has both a couple and an individual dimension in that individual ideals, preferences, and motivations for desiring to have children (or not) must be negotiated on within reproductive partnerships (Fennell, 2006).
2. “Racial” descriptors are enclosed in scare quotes to indicate their artificiality. They are pragmatically employed, not endorsed.
3. This article is part of a special issue of the *Journal of Family Issues* on Men Preparing for Fatherhood, which arose from a panel on Men and Reproduction at the International Association of Sociology World Forum, Buenos Aires, August 2012, convened by Maria Lohan, William Marsiglio, and Lorraine Culley (<http://www.isa-sociology.org/buenos-aires-2012/>).
4. Meyers (2001) refers to the assumption that children are an inevitable part of married heterosexual adulthood as “automatic childbearing” (p. 747). This notion captures the common passive decision-making style, which entails a lack of deliberate and rational planning and discussion and where matters are largely left to chance (Fennell, 2006) and the lack of communication is seen not only as normative, but ideal.
5. Determined according to South African demographic statistics with some leeway for the likely age gap between partners (Department of Health, 1998; Zuberi, Sibanda, & Udjo, 2005).

6. The original research design, which sought to include partners from the same couple, had to be altered to accommodate this development.
7. A "discursive resource" is defined as "a set of meanings that exist prior to an instance of talk and [are] detectable within it" (Reynolds et al., 2007, p. 335). It coincides with the notion of discourse and discursive regime (Taylor & Littleton, 2006) and is common to a number of critical discursive psychological narrative analyses.
8. These are distinct types of discursive resources that provide specific culturally familiar patterns of temporal ordering with distinctive socioculturally established endpoints (Taylor & Littleton, 2006).

References

- Almack, K. (2006). Seeking sperm: Accounts of lesbian couples' reproductive decision-making and understanding of the needs of the child. *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*, 20(1), 1-22.
- Berkowitz, D., & Marsiglio, W. (2007). Gay men: Negotiating procreative, father, and family identities. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69, 366-381.
- Browner, C. H. (2005). *Some unexpected consequences of implementing gender "neutral" reproductive programs and policies* (Working Paper No. 284). East Lansing: Women and International Development, Michigan State University.
- Cooper, D., Harries, J., Myer, L., Orner, P., Bracken, H., & Zweigenthal, V. (2007). "Life is still going on": Reproductive intentions among HIV-positive women and men in South Africa. *Social Science & Medicine*, 65, 274-283.
- Department of Health. (1998). *South Africa demographic and health survey*. Retrieved <http://www.doh.gov.za/facts/index.html> Documnet also available at: <http://www.mrc.ac.za/bod/dhsfin1.pdf>
- Donovan, C. (2000). Who needs a father? Negotiating biological fatherhood in British lesbian families using self-insemination. *Sexualities*, 3, 149-164.
- Draper, J. (2003). Men's passage to fatherhood: An analysis of the contemporary relevance of transition theory. *Nursing Inquiry*, 10(1), 66-78.
- Dyer, S. J., Abrahams, N., Mokoena, N. E., & van der Spuy, Z. M. (2004). "You are a man because you have children": Experiences, reproductive health knowledge and treatment seeking behaviour of men suffering from couple infertility in South Africa. *Human Reproduction*, 9, 960-967.
- Dyer, S. J., Mokoena, N. E., Maritz, J., & van der Spuy, Z. M. (2008). Motives for parenthood among couples attending a level 3 infertility clinic in the public health sector in South Africa. *Human Reproduction*, 23, 352-357.
- Fennell, J. (2006, March). *"It happened one night": The sexual context of fertility decision-making*. Paper presented at the Population Association of America, 2006 Annual Meeting, Los Angeles, California. Retrieved from <http://www.popline.org/node/188425>
- Figueroa-Perea, J. (2003). A gendered perspective on men's reproductive health. *International Journal of Men's Health*, 2, 111-130.
- Gipson, J. D., & Hindin, M. J. (2007). "Marriage means having children and forming your family, so what is the need of discussion?" Communication and negotiation of

- childbearing preferences among Bangladeshi couples. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 9, 185-198.
- Greene, M. E., & Biddlecom, A. E. (2000). Absent and problematic men: Demographic accounts of male reproductive roles. *Population and Development Review*, 26, 81-115.
- Henwood, K., & Procter, J. (2003). The "good father": Reading men's accounts of paternal involvement during the transition to first-time fatherhood. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 42, 335-337.
- Jewkes, R., Dunkle, K., Nduna, D., & Shai, N. (2010). Intimate partner violence, relationship power inequity, and incidence of HIV infection in young women in South Africa: A cohort study. *Lancet*, 376, 41-48.
- Knoester, C., & Eggebeen, D. J. (2006). The effects of the transition to parenthood and subsequent children on men's well-being and social participation. *Journal of Family Issues*, 27, 1532-1560.
- Letherby, G. (2002). Childless and bereft? Stereotypes and realities in relation to "voluntary" and "involuntary" childlessness and womanhood. *Sociological Inquiry*, 72(1), 7-20.
- Lupton, D., & Barclay, L. (1997). *Constructing fatherhood: Discourses and experiences*. London: Sage.
- Macleod, C. (2001). Teenage motherhood and the regulation of mothering in the scientific literature: The South African example. *Feminism & Psychology*, 11, 493-511.
- Macleod, C. (2003). The conjugalisation of reproduction in South African teenage pregnancy literature. *Psychology in Society*, 29, 23-37.
- Marsiglio, W. (Ed.). (1995). *Fatherhood: Contemporary theory, research, and social policy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Marsiglio, W., Amato, P., Day, R. D., & Lamb, M. E. (2004). Scholarship on fatherhood in the 1990s and beyond. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62, 1173-1191.
- Marsiglio, W., Hutchinson, S., & Cohan, M. (2000). Envisioning fatherhood: A social psychological perspective on young men without kids. *Family Relations*, 49, 133-142.
- Marsiglio, W., Hutchinson, S., & Cohan, M. (2001). Young men's procreative identity: Becoming aware, being aware, and being responsible. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63, 123-135.
- Mazzei, L. (2003). Inhabited silences: In pursuit of a muffled subtext. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9, 355-368.
- Meyers, D. T. (2001). The rush to motherhood: Pronatalist discourse and women's autonomy. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 26, 735-773.
- Mallon, G. P. (2004). *Gay men choosing parenthood*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Mollen, D. (2006). Voluntarily childfree women: Experiences and counseling considerations. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 28, 269-284.
- Morrell, R. (2005). Youth, fathers and masculinity in South Africa today. *Agenda, Special Focus on Gender, Culture and Rights*, 84-87.

- Morrell, R., Bhana, D., & Shefer, T. (2012). *Books and babies: Pregnancy and young parents in schools*. Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.
- Morrell, R., & Richter, L. (Eds.). (2006). *Baba: Men and fatherhood in South Africa*. Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.
- Morison, T., & Macleod, C. (in press). A performative-performance analytical approach: Infusing Butlerian theory into the narrative-discursive method qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 19(8).
- Nauk, B. (2007). Value of children and the framing of fertility: Results from a cross-cultural comparative survey in 10 societies. *European Sociological Review*, 23, 615-629.
- Peterson, A., & Jenni, C.B. (2003). Men's experience of making the decision to have their first child: A phenomenological analysis. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples and Families*, 11, 353-363.
- Poland, B., & Pederson, A. (1998). Reading between the lines: Interpreting silences in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 4, 293-312.
- Rabun, C., & Oswald, R. F. (2009). Upholding and expanding the normal family: Future fatherhood through the eyes of gay male emerging adults. *Fathering*, 7, 269-285.
- Reynolds, J., & Taylor, S. (2004). Narrating singleness: Life stories and deficit identities. *Narrative Inquiry*, 15, 197-251.
- Reynolds, J., Wetherell, M., & Taylor, S. (2007). Choice and chance: Negotiating agency in narratives of singleness. *The Sociological Review*, 55(2), 331-351.
- Rijken, A. J., & Knijn, T. (2009). Couples' decisions to have a first child: Comparing pathways to early and late parenthood. *Demographic Research*, 21, 765-802. Retrieved from www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol21/26/
- Ryan-Flood, R. (2005). Contested heteronormativities: Discourses of fatherhood among lesbian parents in Sweden and Ireland. *Sexualities*, 8, 189-204.
- Sevón, E. (2005). Timing motherhood: Experiencing and narrating the choice to become a mother. *Feminism & Psychology*, 15, 461-482.
- Shefer, T. (2012, July). *Troubling South African masculinities and male sexualities*. Paper presented at the International Congress of Psychology, Cape Town, South Africa.
- Stern, O., Peacock, D., & Alexander, H. (2009). *Working with men and boys: Emerging strategies from across Africa to address gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS*. Cape Town, South Africa: Sonke Gender Justice Network and the MenEngage Network.
- Swartz, S., & Bhana, A. (2009). *Teenage Tata: Voices of young fathers in South Africa*. Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press.
- Taylor, S., & Littleton, K. (2006). Biographies in talk: A narrative-discursive research approach. *Qualitative Sociology Review*, 11(1), 22-38.
- Zuberi, T., Sibanda, A., & Udjo, E. (Eds.). (2005). *The demography of South Africa*. New York, NY: M.E. Sharpe.