

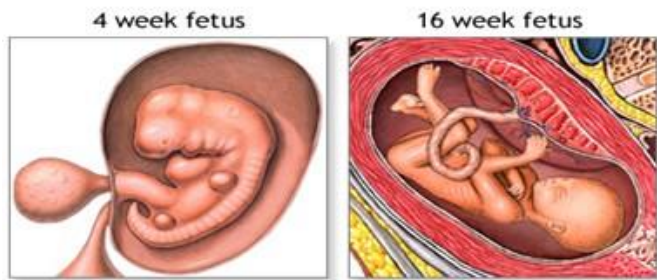
TRUTH IN LOVE

**Cognitive Conception:
*When Men Become Fathers***

**By Parris J. Baker
February 2024**

Conception occurs when there is unprotected sex between a man and a woman. The sperm of the male travels through the female and fertilizes an egg in the fallopian tube. The egg was released during ovulation, which generally occurs 14 days after the first day of the woman's menstrual cycle. If the sperm successfully fertilizes the egg, the fertilized egg, now called a zygote, continues down the fallopian tube to implant itself in the uterus.

Approximately one week later, the zygote, or blastocyst, attaches or implants itself to the innermost lining of the uterus called the endometrium.^[1] The process of conception operates in the same way during in vitro fertilization, except the sperm fertilizes an egg in a laboratory. The fertilized egg or embryo is placed in the uterus of the woman where the embryo implants itself. At this point, pregnancy has begun.



Morning sickness typically continues from the 4th week of pregnancy through the 16th week

ADAM

The entire ecosystem for the woman adapts to the presence of the fertilized egg growing within her. The menstrual cycle stops. Some women experience morning sickness (nausea and vomiting). Numerous hormones, coded with important genetic instructions, are released to prepare the woman, her body, and the fetus for a 37- to 40-week journey to birth. Though

she may not look or feel pregnant and may even deny that she is pregnant, the woman is pregnant.

Soon, the woman, the baby, and potentially all their relatives will have new identities. Parents of the expectant mother will soon be called gram, poppa, nana, and abuela/abuelo. Brothers and sisters will become uncles and aunts. Some of her friends may become godparents.

Over the next 37 to 40 weeks, this life-altering event called pregnancy will cause the expectant mother to experience many changes. For a time, the expectant mother may feel “out of control” of her life and her body. Physically, her body will change and adapt to accommodate the growing and developing baby. Emotionally, the expectant mother will express a variety of mood swings, due to a lot of factors: fatigue, stress, changes in metabolism, and the presence of the hormones estrogen and progesterone.[2] Depending on the timing and circumstances of the pregnancy, the expectant mother may be overwhelmed with worry and doubt, concerned about her ability to physically and financially care for the baby, and for some, have internal debates about carrying the baby to delivery.

What happens to men during the gestation period is less known. When do these important life transitions occur with and for men, particularly for men who do not and will not reside with the mother of their child and the baby? Simply stated, when do men become fathers?

The announcement of a woman’s pregnancy does not affect most men physically. While the expectant mother’s body will change drastically during each trimester, men will not experience significant growth in their hips and breasts. The experience of the embryo implantation in the uterus will not be felt or noticed by the man (cessation of a menstrual cycle) nor will he gain an average of 25 to 40 pounds during pregnancy. Most men will not become ill with nor even comprehend morning sickness.

In both healthy marital and nonmarital relationships, even if the pregnancy is unplanned, mistimed, or unintended,^[3] the news of pregnancy is generally celebrated, and the parents almost immediately begin the process of attachment. However, for men, the announcement of pregnancy is initially contingent upon the man's acceptance or rejection of his new role identity as a father. Men do not physically become pregnant. The gestation period for men is a process called cognitive conception.

What is cognitive cognition? According to the American Psychological Association,^[4] cognition is: all forms of knowing and awareness, such as perceiving, conceiving, remembering, reasoning, judging, imagining, and problem solving. Along with affect (feeling/emotion) and conation (behavior), it is one of the three traditionally identified components of mind.

The Latin meaning of the term conception or to conceive means to “take into” either the “womb” or the “mind.” Therefore, when an idea, thought, image, or added information is presented, like sperm, the idea searches for a schema – patterns of thinking and behaviors that function as mental models, built from our memories, which are used to organize noteworthy experiences.



What becomes operational in the decision-making process are self-schemas and event-schemas. Self-schemas are centered on what the person knows about themselves, both the present self and the archetype or future self. Event-schemas are like scripts, providing directions on what to do, how to feel, and what to say in a particular situation. The process of

cognitive conception begins when the idea of becoming a father is initially introduced.

The man, upon receiving the news that he has or will become a father, attempts to find a cognitive schema to assess the new identity. Based on the interaction of his self-schema and his event schema and how well each schema has been developed, the man will accept or reject the role identity of father.

It is crucial, therefore, to assess the cognitive state of the man when he received the news that he is a father. There are numerous possible reasons why men reject the role identity of father:

1. Poor history with men in father roles
2. Attempts to delay or deny acknowledgment of paternity
3. Poor interpersonal relationship with the mother-of-the-child
4. Not ready to accept the father role identity
5. Role ambiguity – who are fathers and what are the role expectations for fathers?

According to the Pew Research Center,^[5] American children (18 and younger) have the highest probability of living in one-parent households (typically the mother) than children in any other industrialized country. Almost one-quarter (23 percent) of all American children reside in single-parent homes, with the poorest children most often residing with their single parent mothers. More fathers are not living with their biological child or children. These fathers are referred to by different, sometimes pejorative, and erroneous identities, such as nonresidential or noncustodial fathers, or deadbeat dads.

Much of what we know about these fathers comes from reports of custodial mothers. However, when asked, men themselves have stated that, beyond breadwinning – the fiscal responsibility for children, the role identity of father is ambiguous and lacks clear expectations. The role identity and role expectations become more obscured and complicated for fathers who do not reside with their children. Access to their children is controlled by child welfare institutions and custodial mothers. Therefore, the amount of time, care, and the type of parent-child activities that can be engaged are all dictated by these gatekeepers.

Fathers state their level of satisfaction is directly impacted by the type of relationship they have with child welfare institutions and the mother(s) of their child(ren). Father satisfaction is a composite of three factors: self-evaluation in the role of a father, the behavior of their children, and their interpersonal relationship with their children. When father satisfaction is high, it is posited that noncustodial fathers will be more positively involved with their children and consistently pay child support.

It is believed that cognitive conception, the acceptance or rejection of the role identity of father, is a predictor of paternal satisfaction. Few researchers have explored the cognitive state of men prior to and upon receiving the news that they would become a father. The exploratory research of the concept of cognitive conception will be guided by Identity Theory.^[6] Other factors that will be explored are the relationship of the mother when the father learned of her pregnancy, the man's history with his biological father, and how the man imagined his role as a father would be with his first-born child.

To develop a testable theoretical construct, further research will be conducted to explore the following concepts:

1. Self-schema of men prior to the birth of their first child
2. Event-schema of men prior to the birth of their first child
3. Cognitive conception – the level of acceptance or rejection of the role identity of father upon receiving the news of becoming a first-time father

This is an ongoing research project. Progress and data will be shared as both become available.

[1] Cleveland Clinic. Conception. [Here](#)

[2] American Pregnancy Association. [Here](#)

[3] Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Of the 6.1 million live births in the United States, almost 45% of the pregnancies were unintended as reported by the mother. Highest risk for unintended pregnancies are women between 18-24 years, high school educated or less, cohabitation, and who are non-Hispanic Asian and Hispanic. In 2021, the percentage of non-marital births was approximately 40%.

Overall, the number of nonmarital births nationally did not significantly change from 2020 (1, 464, 121) to 2021 (1, 464, 455). [Here](#)

[4] American Psychological Association (APA). Cognition defined. [Here](#)

[5] Stephanie Kramer. U.S. has the world's highest rate of children living in single parent households. Pew Research Center, December 12, 2019. [Here](#)

[6] Sheldon Stryker. Identity salience and role performance. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 4:558 – 564. 1968.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Parris J. Baker is an Associate Professor at Gannon University, where he is the Social Work, Mortuary Science and Gerontology Program Director. An alumnus of Gannon, Baker received his graduate degree from Case Western Reserve University, Jack, Joseph, & Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences and his doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work. Presently, Baker serves as the Senior Pastor of Believers International Worship Center, Inc. He is married and has five children.



Dr. Baker can be reached at: baker002@gannon.edu.

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