



Baby lust: Not just for the ladies

Reactions to young, unplanned pregnancy are “staggeringly gendered,” but it’s not the women who are pleased

By Kate Harding

So, you know how women are all obsessed with having babies, and men are all terrified of it? And that means that straight women who want children have to force their male partners into parenthood through such underhanded methods as carefully brainwashing the guys over time, issuing ultimatums, or “forgetting” to take their birth control—because otherwise, the human race would go extinct for lack of genuinely enthusiastic potential fathers? I mean, I don’t know. Maybe you’ve met a man who says he wanted to have a child, or that he enjoys being a dad. Maybe you even are one of those men. But let’s be real here, people. The facts are plain: Baby lust is a chick thing, and men fear little more than getting tricked into breeding. Romantic comedies, women’s magazines and sitcoms can’t all be wrong.

Or maybe they can. A recent study for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy surveyed 1,800 18-29-year-olds about pregnancy and found that their reactions to the prospect of an unplanned pregnancy were “staggeringly gendered” according to Amanda Hess of *The Sexist*. But “Guess which group is more likely to be ‘pleased’ at an unplanned pregnancy?” she writes. Hint: “It’s not the one with the silently weeping ovaries.”

The survey found that the vast majority of sexually active straight people in that age group would prefer not to be parents just yet: “86% of men and 88% of women say it is important—74% of men and 80% of women describe it as very important—to avoid pregnancy in their lives right now.” Yet 7 out of 10 pregnancies among twentysomethings are unplanned, 19 percent of those who are not trying to get pregnant said they use no contraception, and close to a quarter are using it inconsistently. Why? Well, there’s still a stunning amount of ignorance about birth control and fertility—for example, over 40 percent of men and women surveyed believed they’d have a 50/50 chance of getting pregnant while using the pill over a year, and close to 50 percent of men and 60 percent of women 18-29 think it’s “at least slightly likely” that they’re infertile. (Way to go, fearmongers!) “Magical thinking” was also a factor, with around 40 percent of men and women admitting they believe that, regardless of contraceptive use, “when it is your time to get pregnant, it will happen.”

But ambivalence also plays a role. Around half of men and women said they’d be interested in parenthood now “if things in their lives were different.” And then there’s the part Hess

noticed. She writes that when asked to consider how they’d respond to an accidental pregnancy,

Forty-three percent of young men responded that they would be “a little pleased” or “very pleased” by the news; only 20 percent of women answered the same. Men also proved more comfortable with an unplanned pregnancy at an earlier age: Thirty-four percent of men 18-19 said they would be pleased. By the time they reach age 20-24, 42 percent of men said they would be pleased. And over 50 percent of men aged 25-29 would be pleased by the news. Remember: this is only among men who deemed it “important” that a pregnancy not occur at this junction.

Meanwhile, between ages 18 and 24, only 16 percent of women would be “pleased,” and that number only goes up to 29 percent for women in their mid-to-late twenties.

In addition to busting right through a few gender stereotypes, these numbers have some intriguing—and in some cases, disturbing—implications. “How many women out there are having sex under the assumption that their male partners are invested in teaming up to prevent pregnancy, only to discover that the guys are privately ecstatic about the idea?” wonders Hess. (There’s a new wrinkle to the male birth control pill debate.) And how much do gender roles have to do with it? Are so many men secretly more pro-pregnancy than they claim to be because of all the cultural messages telling them that women are supposed to want babies, while they’re only supposed to want no-strings sex? Or is it because of the cultural reality that women are still most often the primary caregivers and more likely to have to put careers and dreams on hold when a child comes along, so men might not feel they have as much to lose?

The study doesn’t answer those questions, but it does make one thing clear: It’s time to abandon the idea that most women in heterosexual relationships would be thrilled to get pregnant if only their stubborn partners were equally enthusiastic. In fact, it seems women are far more afraid of accidental pregnancy than men are, even as they close in on the big, egg-depleted 3-0. So perhaps instead of spending so much time telling young women they’d better get procreatin’ before their ovaries shrivel up and fall out, we should spend a little more time trying to rectify the “high levels of confusion and misinformation that young adults have about fertility and contraception.”