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## Original Article

# Childbirth expectations and correlates at the final stage of pregnancy in Chinese expectant parents

Xian Zhang<sup>a</sup>, Hong Lu<sup>b,\*</sup><sup>a</sup> Nursing College, Zhengzhou University, Zhengzhou, China<sup>b</sup> School of Nursing, Peking University, Beijing, China

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** To explore the childbirth expectations of Chinese expectant parents during their transition to parenthood.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional descriptive survey was used through the Chinese version of the Childbirth Expectations Questionnaire. A total of 240 expectant parents were recruited when they were admitted to the obstetric units waiting for delivery at a large Maternal and Child Health care Center in Beijing, and 210 couples completed the questionnaires, yielding a response rate of 87.5%.

**Results:** The expectant parents had a high level of childbirth expectations towards caregiving environment, spousal support, control and participation and medical support. Conversely, their expectations toward labor pain and their own ability to cope with the pain were relatively low. Expectant fathers' childbirth expectations and preference of partner's accompany were two significant predictors of expectant mothers' childbirth expectations, explaining 18.9% and 3.3% of the total variance, respectively. While expectant mothers' childbirth expectations was the only significant predictor of expectant fathers' childbirth expectations.

**Conclusion:** This study adds to understanding of the childbirth expectations of Chinese expectant parents. It is suggested that maternity healthcare providers pay close attention to the childbirth expectations of expectant parents, and improve the nursing care service to promote positive childbirth experiences and satisfaction of expectant parents.

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [luhong@bjmu.edu.cn](mailto:luhong@bjmu.edu.cn) (H. Lu).

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## 1. Introduction

Childbirth is a complex life event characterized by rapid biological, social and emotional transitions [1], and is of great expectation and enormous stress for many women and their families [2]. A satisfactory childbirth experience has a profound implication for a woman's future well-being [3], the mother–baby relationship [4,5] as well as the long term well-being of the family [3,6]. Previous studies have shown that positive childbirth expectations foster positive experiences in labor [7,8], and the fulfillment of childbirth expectations is a major factor contributing to a woman's birth experience [4,9,10]. Aligning expectations with experience is a crucial element in achieving the goal of promoting women and their families' quality of life [11]. As hospital maternity care has become more family-centered in recent years, expectant fathers' attendance during pregnancy and delivery and their childbirth-related needs have raised growing concern among maternity health professionals [12–14]. Exploring expectant parents' childbirth expectations may give maternity health-care professionals valuable insight and allow them to be able to provide high quality maternity care thus promoting a more positive birth experience.

While the impact of childbirth expectations on the overall birth experience has been documented, there was a lack of consensus on the definition of childbirth expectations [9,15]. Previous literature revealed that childbirth expectation is a complex and multidimensional construct involving many aspects of childbirth [8]. Beaton and Gupton [16] pointed out that women had developed detailed expectations of the childbirth experience, their ability to cope with labor pain, the roles of support persons and health care personnel, as well as amount of medical intervention. Findings from Gibbins and Thomson [17] indicated women all wanted to take an active part in their labor and the feeling of being 'in control' was the essential component of childbirth expectations. Fenwick et al.'s study [11] revealed that women hold both positive expectations of the childbirth experience, being involvement and participation in labor process, as well as negative expectations toward labor pain and medical intervention. Labor pain was an important aspect of childbirth expectation, previous studies have shown that pregnant women usually anticipate a very painful labor process [2,7], they also expressed expectations of being able to cope with labor pain [16]. In Kao et al.'s study [6], five factors were identified by expectant parents regarding childbirth expectations: the caregiving environment, spousal support, control and participation, labor pain expectations and medical support. This categorization provides a more specific and measurable way for expectant parents and caregivers to evaluate childbirth expectations.

Previous literature [18,19] indicated that childbirth expectations and perceptions have cultural variations. In Chinese culture, childbirth experience is greatly influenced by family interaction [20]. Chinese people value strong and cohesive bonds between family members [21,22]. Additionally, Chinese women may have different expectations towards medical intervention with women from other cultures. Cheung [23] explored Chinese and Scottish women's opinion

of choice and control during labor. The findings suggested that Chinese women tended to fit into the prevailing current medical model, while many of the Scottish women wanted a 'natural' birth that conveyed a sense of control and being free from medical intervention. A similar trend was also observed by Ip et al. [21] that Chinese primiparas expected to ultimately rely on medical interventions. On the other hand, the one-child policy (OCP) in China may also have a direct effect on Chinese parents' childbirth expectations. Due to strict policy enforcement, for most expectant parents, the forthcoming childbirth experience will be a unique life event, which is of great concerns and challenges for them due to lack of experience, bringing possibly greater expectations [22].

Additionally, maternity health care is an obstetrician-led model in China [24]. Women with normal and healthy pregnancies are commonly subjected to routine interventions, such as electronic fetal monitoring, episiotomy, pubic shaving, rectal examination, and supine delivery [25,26]. This trend is also reflected in the rising rates of caesarean section in China [27]. In view of this evidence, it is important to explore Chinese expectant parents' childbirth expectations given the increasing level of medical intervention and the awareness of the importance of family-centered maternity care.

To date, there are limited studies relating to expectant parents' childbirth expectations in mainland China. Therefore, the purposes of this study were to understand Chinese expectant parents' childbirth expectations during their transition to parenthood and its influencing factors to address an important gap in the evidence.

## 2. Methods

A cross-sectional survey design was selected to fulfill the study objectives, and a structured questionnaire was used to gather self-reported information.

### 2.1. Participants

This study was carried out at the obstetric units of a Maternal and Child Health care Center situated in Beijing, China. A consecutive sample was recruited among expectant parents who were admitted to the obstetric units waiting for delivery from October to December 2010. Recognizing that childbirth expectations may be biased by past experiences, only parents expecting their first child were recruited. Inclusion criteria were: married parents aged 18 or above, with a gestational age between 37 weeks and 42 weeks, with no prenatal complications, had no plans for a caesarean delivery, and willing to participate in this study. To build the regression model with 10 independent variables, 130 respondent data were needed ( $n = 50 + 8k$ ,  $k$  is the number of independent variables) [28]. However, as we considered the questionnaire completed by both parents as a valid response, we expanded the final target sample size as 240. The anonymous completed questionnaires were returned in sealed envelopes via collection boxes placed in the nurse stations.

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