



Original article

It's Not Planned, But Is It Okay? The Acceptability of Unplanned Pregnancy Among Young People

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A B S T R A C T

Background: It is well-established that current measures of pregnancy intentions fail to capture the complexity of couples' lived experiences and decisions regarding reproductive decision making. Despite limitations, these measures guide programs, policy, and clinical practice. Herein, we explore prospective pregnancy acceptability, which captures whether individuals anticipate considering an unexpected pregnancy welcomed, manageable, or okay.

Methods: Individual qualitative interviews were conducted with 50 young (ages 18–24 years) women and their male partners ($N = 100$) to elucidate prospective pregnancy desires and perspectives on pregnancy planning. Using a thematic approach, we analyzed data from a subsample ($n = 88$) of participants who did not currently desire a pregnancy.

Results: Despite lack of pregnancy desire, 37 participants indicated that a pregnancy would be acceptable. Several themes emerged as reasons for pregnancy acceptability, including feeling prepared for children, relational stability, having knowledge of what it takes to parent, and taking a “whatever happens” approach toward pregnancy planning. Notably, a number of reasons for pregnancy acceptability were also described as reasons for lack of acceptability. For example, although many parents in the sample found pregnancy acceptable owing to their knowledge of the time and resources that raising children required, other parents found pregnancy unacceptable for this same reason.

Conclusions: Acceptability captures nuances of prospective views on pregnancy and what it means for young people's lives that current intentions language and framing often neglects. Additionally, acceptability may be a construct that resonates with the perspectives and lives of young people for whom the notion of active pregnancy planning is not salient.

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Despite recent decreases in unintended pregnancy rates in the United States, 45% of all pregnancies are still classified as unintended (Finer & Zolna, 2016). The traditional measurement of unintended pregnancy dichotomously and retrospectively classifies pregnancies as intended or not, based on whether the pregnancy was wanted at the time of pregnancy or not at all (Santelli et al., 2003). A growing body of literature suggests that binary classifications of pregnancies as unintended or intended may misclassify women's intentions and neglect the complexity

of pregnancy planning (Borrero et al., 2015; Miller, 2011; Mumford, Sapra, King, Louis, & Buck Louis, 2016; Santelli et al., 2003). Some women have unclear, ambivalent, or indifferent pregnancy intentions, whereas others clearly do not plan to become pregnant but may welcome an unexpected pregnancy (Borrero et al., 2015; Miller, 2011; Santelli et al., 2003). The conceptualization and measurement of “intention” in unintended pregnancy indicators is often imprecise; indeed, unintended pregnancy measures are frequently based on pregnancy wantedness, the timing of pregnancy, and contraceptive use, with no reference to the terms intention or intended. For example, the questions used for the National Survey of Family Growth's measure of unintended pregnancy never directly ask women if a pregnancy was intended (Mumford et al., 2016). Moreover, there is often a gap between feelings, behavior, and

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intention, because they are qualitatively different constructs (Bachrach & Morgan, 2013; Jones, 2017; Sable & Libbus, 2000; Santelli, Speizer, Avery, & Kendall, 2006; Zabin, 1999). One analysis of the National Survey of Family Growth used an alternative construction that classified pregnancies as intended when women were not using or stopped using contraception because they wanted to become pregnant, and when women who did not want future pregnancies also reported not minding become pregnant; this alternative measurement approach yielded a prevalence of unintended pregnancy 6 percentage points lower than the conventional approach (Mumford et al., 2016). Moreover, traditional measures of unintended pregnancy may over-represent low-income women, women of color, and young women, for whom pregnancy planning may be less likely to be a salient or realistic concept (Borrero et al., 2015; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Jones, Frohwirth, & Blades, 2016; Kendall et al., 2005; Moos, Petersen, Meadows, Melvin, & Spitz, 1997; Zabin, 1999). These problems in conceptualization and operationalization blur the clinical and public health relevance of data on unintended pregnancy, as well as the scope of unintended pregnancy. Nevertheless, reducing unintended pregnancy has been a long-standing public health imperative in the United States, evidenced most recently by its inclusion in the *Healthy People 2020* goals (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010).

Researchers have explored the context of pregnancies that do not explicitly fall into the intended and unintended categories. Some have characterized pregnancy intentions as on a spectrum rather than a binary (Higgins, Popkin, & Santelli, 2012; Schwarz, Lohr, Gold, & Gerbert, 2007; Zabin, 1999). Other investigators have focused on pregnancy ambivalence, which captures conflicting feelings and desires toward pregnancy, although two studies found that women who would typically be categorized as ambivalent because of incongruent answers about desire for and happiness about pregnancy were clear about their desires toward pregnancy (Aiken, Dillaway, & Mevs-Korff, 2015; Gómez, Freihart, Arteaga, & Villaseñor, 2017). More recently, scholars have proposed the construct of pregnancy acceptability in response to the chasm between data on pregnancy intentions and women's lived experiences, including their emotional, financial, relational, and social contexts (Aiken, Borrero, Callegari, & Dehlendorf, 2016; Borrero et al., 2015). The concept of pregnancy acceptability emerged to encompass greater complexity toward perceptions of pregnancy than typically allowed for by conventional approaches. For example, some women make postconception decisions about whether a pregnancy is acceptable, regardless of preconception desire; others may not view an unintended pregnancy as a negative event (Aiken et al., 2016; Borrero et al., 2015). In particular, Aiken et al. (2016) argue that, rather than preemptively labeling pregnancies as unwanted or occurring too soon, equally important is whether women would classify a pregnancy as acceptable or not after it occurs. Indeed, in a qualitative study of low-income African American and White women in Pittsburgh, participants described making postconception assessments of the acceptability, the timing, their preparedness, and their feelings about pregnancy (Borrero et al., 2015). This finding may have implications for future health outcomes, because maternal and child health outcomes have been shown to differ based on the specifics of timing, wantedness, and feelings about the pregnancy (D'Angelo, Colley, Gilbert, Rochat, Santelli, & Herold, 2004; Pulley, Klerman, Tang, & Baker, 2002; Shah et al., 2011).

To date, no work has prospectively examined pregnancy acceptability, which, stemming from prior work on acceptability

and our data, we conceptualize as the perception that a pregnancy would be considered welcomed, okay, and/or manageable regardless of whether it is currently wanted or planned (Aiken et al., 2016; Borrero et al., 2015). The present analysis responds to a gap in the literature by describing the ways that pregnancy acceptability is conceptualized in a qualitative study of young women and their male partners.

Methods

We analyzed qualitative data from the Young Couples Study, a mixed methods study that sought to inform the development of new measures of pregnancy intentions. Couples were recruited via Facebook and Craigslist, as well as flyers posted at various community organizations, health clinics, community colleges, and universities in the San Francisco Bay Area. Interested participants filled out online screening surveys and, if eligible, provided contact information for study staff. To be eligible for the study, the female partner had to select Latina or Hispanic, Black or African American, Asian, or White as a racial/ethnic identity; be between the ages of 18 and 24; not be pregnant or actively trying to become pregnant; and be able to identify a primary male partner age 18 or older with whom she was sexually active and had been in a relationship with for at least 2 months. We used a purposive sampling approach, ensuring racial and ethnic diversity in the sample, as well as inclusion of parents and young people who were not students. Trained interviewers conducted separate, simultaneous, in-depth qualitative interviews with 50 young women and their male partners ($N = 100$) in 2015 and 2016. Interviews were conducted in person and averaged 77 minutes in length. Before the interviews, participants completed brief surveys to assess demographic characteristics, contraception history, and pregnancy intentions. Upon completing the interview, each partner received an incentive of \$30. Using a semistructured interview guide, we explored participants' relationship histories, pregnancy and contraceptive experiences, and current and future pregnancy intentions. Pregnancy intentions were elicited by asking participants to describe whether they would like to become pregnant in the future, whether they had talked to their partner about pregnancy, when the ideal time to become pregnant would be, and whether their pregnancy plans factored into their contraceptive decision making. Last, participants were asked how they would feel if they unexpectedly found out they were pregnant today, which evoked the construct of pregnancy acceptability. Participants were not explicitly asked how they would resolve a pregnancy, although many spontaneously described this in their interviews. The Committee for Protection of Human Subjects at the University of California, Berkeley approved the study protocol.

Interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim. To inform measure development, we qualitatively analyzed participants' descriptions of their current pregnancy intentions and desires. During the measure development process, we observed that many participants described how an unexpected pregnancy would be acceptable, even if they did not currently desire a pregnancy. These initial observations informed our full coding and analysis process for this article.

To guide our analysis, we used the sort and sift, think and shift method, in which we initially created extensive analytic memos of each transcript to capture important emergent themes (Maietta, 2006). These analytic memos informed the iterative development of a codebook, which was finalized after all memos

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