



Parents' experience of unintended childbearing: A qualitative study of factors that mitigate or exacerbate effects



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ABSTRACT

Births resulting from an unintended pregnancy affect individuals differentially, and some may experience more negative consequences than others. In this study, we sought to describe the mechanisms through which the severity of effects may be mitigated or exacerbated. We conducted in-depth interviews with 35 women and 30 men, all with a youngest child born resulting from an unintended pregnancy, in two urban sites in the United States. Respondents described both negative and positive effects of the child's birth in the areas of school; work and finances; partner relationships; personal health and outlook on life trajectories. Mechanisms through which unintended pregnancies mitigated or exacerbated certain effects fell at the individual (e.g. lifestyle modification), interpersonal (e.g. partner support) and structural (e.g. workplace flexibility) levels. These qualitative findings deepen understanding of the impact of unintended childbearing on the lives of women, men and families.

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1. Introduction

More than one third of all births in the United States are reported as originating from an unintended pregnancy, and this proportion has changed very little over the past 25 years (Mosher et al., 2012; Lindberg and Kost, 2014a). The premise that unintended childbearing has significant negative effects for mothers and children strongly influences public health policy and much of current research on reproductive health and behavior (Institute of Medicine (2011); U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), 2015). Associations between unintended pregnancy and a range of negative outcomes across several domains, including infant health, mothers' socioeconomic and career trajectories and mental health, and parents' relationship quality, have been documented in the literature (Gipson et al., 2008; Sonfield et al., 2013).

Yet, systematic reviews of published studies have found that the accumulated body of evidence presents mixed findings, with significant variation in the strength of documented associations (Gipson et al., 2008; Logan et al., 2007). Evidence supporting differential outcomes by intention status is often weaker than

expected, which may partly be due to broad variation of experiences among individuals who have had an unintended pregnancy – a potentially non-homogeneous classification (Diaz and Fiel, 2016). Limitations of the measure of unintended pregnancy itself may also contribute to diluting the relationship between this driver and any potential consequences (Gipson et al., 2008). In addition, qualitative work has demonstrated that some parents of births resulting from unintended pregnancies report perceived positive impacts of unintended childbearing, such as feelings of improved self-worth and meaning to one's life, as expressed by both women and men living in low-income communities in Philadelphia and Camden (Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Edin and Nelson, 2013), and increased happiness, as described by primarily Latina women living in Austin, Texas (Aiken et al., 2015). This variability in experiences suggests that there may be intervening factors that play a role in determining why some parents of children born as a result of an unintended pregnancy experience more negative or detrimental outcomes, whereas others do not.

Quantitative analyses of population-based data have demonstrated the impact of pregnancy intentions on certain outcomes but do not shed much light on the mechanisms through which these impacts occur. For example, there is evidence that unwanted births are linked to increased relationship dissolution between parents (Maddow-Zimet et al., 2016); yet it is unclear why. A few studies find that stress may contribute to, or exacerbate, the extent to which mothers experience maternal depression as a result of an

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unintended pregnancy (Horowitz and Goodman, 2004; Nelson & O'Brien, 2012). It is highly likely that there are other mechanisms, beyond those at the psychological level, that help to explain how unintended pregnancies impact people's lives.

To illustrate the role that these mechanisms may play in determining the extent to which individuals experience negative and/or positive outcomes as a result of an unintended pregnancy, we use Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (1984). Within this model, stressful events are experienced through a process that is composed of causal antecedents (both individual and environmental factors), mediators and effects (Lazarus, 1991). Building from this model, one's social context influences how he or she experiences the "life event" of a pregnancy, which then triggers an evaluation of the significance of the challenge for his or her own life context ("appraisals"), and ascertainment of the level of control that he or she has and the extent to which "resources" are available to help exert that control. Once these appraisals have been made, the presence (or absence) of coping strategies (strengthened by social support resources) leads to varying effects for the individual. Thus, the processes, or mechanisms, that we seek to describe in this study are measures of individual- and interpersonal-level coping strategies, resources and social support that influence the experience of a pregnancy under the situation in which individuals did not intend for the pregnancy to occur, and can be conceptualized using the Transactional Model. We build on Lazarus and Folkman's model by hypothesizing that mechanisms themselves, in addition to antecedents, may also be structural in nature.

This analysis uses qualitative methods to explore how women and men experience effects of unintended childbearing. We sought to understand the source of variability in the experience of having a child resulting from an unintended pregnancy. That is, our aim is to describe the mechanisms – individual, interpersonal and structural – which may be responsible for variation in the effects individuals experience, and to identify how these mechanisms mitigate or exacerbate those experiences. The focus of this study is not on comparing the perceptions of individuals experiencing an unintended birth to those who have had an intended one, but rather to highlight why the former group's experience of having had an unintended birth results in differential outcomes due to the presence or absence of certain conditions and mechanisms in these individuals' lives. We draw attention to how the unexpected shock of an unintended pregnancy can intensify difficulties already faced by many parents. This study contributes an examination of the mechanisms behind a range of potential effects experienced by both mothers and fathers, and helps us to understand the range of experiences of individuals who raise a child from an unintended pregnancy.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample and data collection

In-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with 35 women and 30 men in two urban sites—one in Oklahoma and one in Connecticut—selected for geographic variation to avoid findings which might reflect conditions specific to one location. Demographic characteristics of respondents are presented in Table 1. Respondents were almost evenly split across the two sites and were diverse in terms of age, race and education levels; over half were in the lowest income bracket and most had never been married, subgroups shown to be at high risk of unintended pregnancy (Finer and Zolna, 2016). Notably, our sample included higher proportions of black and Hispanic individuals as well as those living below the poverty line as compared to a comparable national sample of men

Table 1

Number and percentage of respondents by sociodemographic characteristic, according to gender of respondent.

Characteristic	Total		Female		Male	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Total	65	100	35	54	30	46
Age						
25–29	27	42	18	51	9	30
30–34	19	29	10	29	9	30
35–39	13	20	4	11	9	30
40–44	6	9	3	9	3	10
Race						
White, Non-Hispanic	24	37	13	37	11	37
Black, Non-Hispanic	28	43	15	43	13	43
Hispanic	10	15	6	17	4	13
Other, Non-Hispanic	3	5	1	3	2	7
Union status						
Never married	51	79	26	74	25	83
Married	11	17	7	20	4	13
Divorced or separated	3	4	2	6	1	3
Poverty status ^a						
0–99	34	52	23	66	11	38
100–199	16	25	8	23	8	28
200–299	10	15	3	9	7	24
300+	4	6	1	3	3	10
Education						
<High school	7	11	2	6	5	17
High school	21	32	13	37	8	27
Some college	28	43	16	46	12	40
College graduate	9	14	4	11	5	17
Interview site						
Mid-south, large city	30	46	18	51	12	40
Northeast, small city	35	54	17	49	18	60

Bolded columns represent percentages of the sample, total and by sex, according to each characteristic.

^a Percent of income relative to federally-designated poverty level for given family size. One male respondent had missing information on this characteristic.

and women who have experienced unintended birth (unpublished tabulations of the 2006–2010 National Survey of Family Growth).

Women and men age 25–44 with a youngest child between 1 and 4 years of age were eligible to participate in the study. We excluded those with children less than one year to focus discussions on longer-term effects rather than on the difficulties of caring for a newborn during a child's first year, and we set the age limit at four to limit potential recall bias. In addition, individuals were asked about the wantedness and timing of the pregnancy leading to their most recent birth during the screening process, employing question wording from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). Specifically, individuals were asked "Right before you became pregnant, did you yourself want to have a(nother) baby at any time in the future?" and, if yes, the follow-up question "So would you say you became pregnant too soon, at about the right time, or later than you wanted?" Only respondents who indicated that their most recent child was born as a result of an unintended pregnancy – a "no" response to the first question (unwanted) or a "too soon" response to the second question (mistimed) – were included in the study. Finally, most respondents were not in relationships with any other respondent; we did have two dyads within the sample, but their transcripts were analyzed no differently than the rest of the sample.

Respondents were recruited using both locally-based professional recruiting companies and Craigslist, a popular classified advertisement website. In each location, the recruiting company identified potential respondents who met the screening criteria in its regularly updated database of potential study participants, and

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