



Family Planning

Adoption Decision Making among Women Seeking Abortion



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A B S T R A C T

Background: Little is known about how adoption factors into pregnancy decision making, particularly when abortion is unavailable.

Methods: We used data from the Turnaway Study, a longitudinal study of 956 women seeking abortion, including 231 women denied abortions owing to gestational limits. Through semiannual quantitative interviews, we assessed the frequency with which women denied abortion consider and choose adoption, and, among adoption participants, decision satisfaction. We compared differences in the demographic profiles of parenting and adoption participants using mixed effects regression models. We conducted in-depth interviews with 31 women who received or were denied wanted abortions, including 2 adoption participants, focused on understanding pregnancy decision making and feelings about their choice. Interviews were coded using inductive and deductive methods.

Results: Most women who received abortions were aware of but uninterested in adoption. A minority of women denied abortions ($n = 231$; 14%) were considering adoption at 1 week after denial. Of participants who gave birth ($n = 161$), most (91%) chose parenting. Parenting participants ($n = 146$) did not differ from adoption participants ($n = 15$) on measures of age, race, or poverty status, although adoption participants were somewhat less likely to be employed (20% vs. 43%; $p = .1$), and somewhat more likely to have completed high school (87% vs. 74%; $p = .08$). Although satisfaction with their decision was high among adoption participants, in-depth interviews revealed mixed emotions.

Conclusions: Among women motivated to avoid parenthood, as evidenced by abortion seeking, adoption is considered or chosen infrequently. Political promotion of adoption as an alternative to abortion is likely not grounded in the reality of women's decision making.

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In the United States, 1.1 million pregnancies end in abortion every year (Jones & Jerman, 2014). In contrast, only a small number of women—estimated to be around 14,000 (Monte & Ellis, 2014)—place their child for infant adoption (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011; Smith, 2007). Approximately 30% of women will have an abortion at some point in their reproductive lives (Jones & Kavanagh, 2011), and a 1999 study indicated that only 1.3% of women (Chandra, Abma, Maza, & Bachrach, 1999) will place an infant for adoption (Chandra, et al., 1999), with agency reporting data suggesting rates of adoption are even lower today (Smith, 2007). These numbers

indicate that, when faced with a pregnancy they do not have either the desire or ability to parent, most American women choose abortion. Indeed, regardless of their familial, educational, racial, and socioeconomic differences, all women are more likely to parent or have an abortion than to place an infant for adoption.

Political messaging, however, continues to hold up adoption as a preferred solution for women facing an unwanted pregnancy (Bassett, 2013; March for Life Education and Defense Fund, 2014; Roe v Wade, 1973; The White House, 2012). Such messaging presents adoption as a direct contrast to abortion and often as a solution to the perceived problem of abortion. Yet previous findings suggest this is a false dichotomy: most birth mothers, as women who choose adoption are most frequently called, are uninterested in adoption (Early Growth and Development Study, 2006; Sisson, 2015); and most women seeking abortion are uninterested in adoption (Foster, Gould, Taylor, & Weitz, 2012; Jones, Frohwirth, & Moore, 2008). Those birth mothers who do consider abortion do not weigh it against adoption, but rather consider these options sequentially; they

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pursue adoption when abortion is deemed inaccessible or unavailable (Early Growth and Development Study, 2006; Sisson, 2015). This pattern is consistent with broader conceptual models of pregnancy acceptability and decision making, in which decisions are made sequentially based on perceived available options (Aiken, Borrero, Callegari, & Dehlendorf, 2016).

Many of the reasons women report for pursuing abortion (Biggs, Gould, & Foster, 2013; Finer, Frohworth, Dauphinee, Susheela, & Moore, 2005) or adoption (Chandra et al., 1999; Donnelly & Voydanoff, 1991; Krahn & Sullivan, 2015; Namerow, Kalmuss, & Cushman, 1993) suggest that both options can be understood within the context of a constrained choice model (Bird & Rieker, 2008), because legal regulations, community values (e.g., abortion stigma), and social and familial factors (e.g., employment, relationship status, parenting responsibilities, financial well-being) can all powerfully limit the choices that are reasonably available to, or perceived to be available to, individual women during their pregnancy decision making (Biggs, et al., 2013; Chandra, et al., 1999; Donnelly & Voydanoff, 1991; Finer, et al., 2005; Krahn & Sullivan, 2015; Namerow, et al., 1993). An increasing number of regulations on abortion care further limit available options, making abortion increasingly difficult to obtain for many women (Guttmacher Institute, 2015; Jones & Jerman, 2013, 2014; Jones & Kooistra, 2011; Roberts, Fuentes, Kriz, Williams, & Upadhyay, 2015; Roberts, Gould, Kimport, Weitz, & Foster, 2013). Factors such as late recognition of pregnancy, needing time to decide, difficulty finding a provider, and cost lead women to present to abortion care later in their pregnancy than they might otherwise (Foster & Kimport, 2013), leaving them more likely to come up against gestational limits and be denied that abortion care (Upadhyay, Weitz, Jones, Barar, & Foster, 2014). Having been turned away from the abortions they wanted, these women must choose between either becoming a parent or placing a child for adoption. For these women, the options are even more definitively restricted, because their first choice is entirely unavailable to them.

This paper explores whether women seeking abortions also consider adoption, and whether women denied abortions pursue adoption when abortion is no longer an available option.

Methods

This paper uses mixed methods to draw on quantitative and qualitative analyses from the Turnaway Study, a 5-year, longitudinal study of women seeking abortion care at 30 facilities across the United States between 2008 and 2010. The primary aim of the study was to document the health and socioeconomic consequences of receiving versus being denied a wanted abortion; thus, women were purposively recruited into two study groups based on whether they presented just before the clinic's gestational limit and were able to obtain abortion care, or just after the limit and were unable to access a wanted abortion. A third group of women presenting in the first trimester was also recruited to examine whether the experiences of women having later abortions are comparable with those having abortions in the first trimester. Women were eligible to participate if they had no known fetal anomalies, were English or Spanish speaking, and were aged 15 or older. Researchers conducted semiannual telephone interviews with study participants over the course of 5 years. Women received \$50 gift cards after each interview. More details about the Turnaway Study methods are described elsewhere (Dobkin et al., 2014).

In addition to semiannual interviews, in-depth, qualitative telephone interviews were conducted with a subset of Turnaway Study participants between October 2014 and December 2015. The third author of this paper conducted qualitative interviews to elicit information about women's pregnancy experiences, decision-making processes, and retrospective emotions about their pregnancy outcomes (e.g., abortion, birth), and perceptions about how their pregnancy, abortion or birth affected their lives. Interview subjects were selected randomly from among the sample of participants who had completed the 5-year semiannual interview by October 2014 and had agreed to future contact by the researchers. To supplement the random sample and ensure as much diversity as possible, attempts were made to purposively recruit all former Turnaway Study participants who spoke Spanish as their primary language or who voluntarily placed a baby for adoption after having being turned away and had not been lost to follow-up by the 5-year interview. Recruitment followed a standardized protocol and relied on contact information gathered at the final Turnaway Study interview. Verbal consent was obtained before interviews took place. After the interview, participants were mailed a \$50 gift card to a national retailer.

Semiannual Interview Measures

During a baseline phone interview with research staff conducted 1 week after they originally sought abortion care, women who were denied an abortion and were no longer seeking an abortion elsewhere were asked about their plans for when the baby is born (Tables 1 and 2). Two researchers independently coded responses to this question, and resolved inconsistencies in coding through group discussion ($\kappa = 0.98$). The baseline interview also collected information on women's sociodemographic characteristics, including age, race/ethnicity, parity, educational attainment, income, employment, and relationship status. Finally, the baseline interview asked women to describe reasons why they delayed seeking abortion care and perceptions of social support from friends and family members.

At 6-month intervals, women completed a follow-up interview by phone. These interviews included close-ended questions about whether women had considered or chosen adoption. Among those who considered but did not choose adoption, a subsequent open-ended question asked about reasons for not choosing adoption (Table 2). Among those who had chosen adoption, close-ended follow-up questions examined whether it was the right decision for them and how they felt about the adoption. To examine the sociodemographic profile of women considering and choosing adoption, as well as trends in satisfaction in adoption decisions, we used data from six interviews, including the baseline, conducted over 2½ years of follow-up.

Semiannual Interview Analysis

We assessed bivariate differences in the demographic profile of birth mothers versus women who went on to parent using mixed effects regression models to account for the clustering of participants within facilities. Depending on the characteristic measured, we used either linear or logistic models. All quantitative analyses were conducted using Stata 14.0 (StataCorp, Inc., College Station, TX). Given the lack of data on this topic and the

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