

Unplanned or unwanted? A randomized study of national estimates of pregnancy intentions

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Objective: To evaluate the effect of question wording on national estimates of pregnancy intentions.

Design: Data drawn from a national probability survey.

Setting: The FECOND study in France in 2010.

Patient(s): Five thousand two hundred and seventy-two women and 3,373 men who reported 11,603 pregnancies.

Intervention(s): Participants randomly assigned to answer 1 of 2 questions on whether they had planned or wanted each of their pregnancies.

Main Outcomes Measure(s): Generalized estimated equation regression models used to test for differences in pregnancy intentions by question wording.

Result(s): The use of different wording yielded a 6% point difference in estimates: 33.5% pregnancies were “unplanned,” and 27.4% were “unwanted.” The addition of information on reasons for not using contraception at the time of conception lead to significant recoding, which resulted in a significant reduction in the wording effect: 23.7% (95% CI 22.4–25.0) of pregnancies were unplanned, and 21.2% (95% CI 19.9–22.5) were unwanted. Results from the multivariate analysis confirm the greater chance of reporting an unplanned as compared with an unwanted pregnancy (relative risk 1.25 [95% CI 1.17–1.33]), even after recoding (relative risk 1.15 [95% CI 1.06–1.24]).

Conclusion(s): This study shows the strong effect of question wording on estimates of pregnancy intentions. The results also support the value of adding information on reasons for nonuse of contraception when assessing pregnancy intentions. (Fertil Steril® 2014;102:1663–70. ©2014 by American Society for Reproductive Medicine.)

Key Words: France, randomized study, survey instrument, unintended pregnancy

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Accurate measures of unintended pregnancy are essential in estimating unmet or poorly met need for contraception and evaluating family planning policies and programs. The diversity of terminology used to assess intentions has raised concern over the robustness of preg-

nancy intention measurements over time and across populations. Indeed, the use of different formulations extends far beyond words, reflecting different constructs of intentions based on attitudinal measures (such as pregnancy wantedness) or behavioral measures (such as pregnancy planning).

Based on data from the National Survey of Family Growth in the United States, Santelli et al. (1) uncovered the multifaceted construct of the conventional dichotomous measure of pregnancy intentions, comprising two complementary dimensions—desire and timing—both independently predictive of pregnancy outcomes. In this line of research, a substantial body of work has drawn attention to the complexity of pregnancy intentions, which are sometimes ambivalent or undetermined (2–4), with time varying depending on life circumstances and relationship context (1, 2).

In France, analysis of repeated national fertility surveys reveals that widespread use of very effective

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methods of contraception has resulted in a sharp decline in the proportion of pregnancies classified as unwanted between the 1970s and the mid-1990s (5). This trend seems to have halted thereafter (5). However, the wording of the question related to pregnancy intentions changed between 1994 and 2000 (the 1994 national survey asked about pregnancy wantedness whereas the 2000 national survey (using the same methodology) asked about pregnancy planning), rendering the comparison problematic.

As noted by several investigators, wantedness and planning relate to distinct dimensions of desires versus behaviors (1, 3). To assess the wording effect as well as provide the means to study short-term and long-term trends in pregnancy intentions in France, a randomization of question wording of pregnancy intentions, using either the 1994 or the 2000 wording (wanted versus planned/foreseen) was introduced in the latest survey conducted in 2010. Because the randomization of questions was nested in a national survey, this analysis, which specifically focuses on the “wording effect,” offers a unique opportunity to investigate the effects of question wording on national estimates of pregnancy intentions in France. The study also adds to the growing body of literature on the topic, as it includes not only women, but also men, who responded to the same set of questions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data are drawn from the FECOND Study, a population-based survey on contraceptive practices and pregnancy intentions conducted in France in 2010. Participants were included following a two-stage random probability sampling method. The initial sample of households was drawn from random digit dialing (including landline and cell phones) and one individual per phone number was randomly selected for participation. Women were oversampled to achieve the desired sample size. The final sample consisted of 5,272 women and 3,373 men aged 15–49 years, who gave oral consent to participate in the study (as required by the French law). Women were oversampled to study specific reproductive health topics (contraceptive failure rates and infertility treatments) that are relatively rare in the general population. The overall refusal rate was 20%. A more detailed description of the study is published elsewhere (6). The FECOND survey received the approval of the relevant French government oversight agency (Commission nationale de l’informatique et des libertés/National Commission on Informatics and Freedoms, CNIL). This study was also approved by the Johns Hopkins institutional review board.

After giving oral consent, participants answered a telephone interview (lasting on average 41 minutes), which collected information on a wide range of domains including sociodemographic characteristics and topics related to sexual and reproductive health. In particular, respondents were asked to describe their reproductive history by providing detailed information on each of their pregnancies including the outcome (live births, elective abortions, miscarriages, ectopic pregnancies, therapeutic abortions, and stillbirths), the ending date, pregnancy duration, their relationship with their partner at the time of conception (stable, unstable,

starting, or breaking up) and their financial situation at the time of the conception (no problems or difficult). A total of 4,785 individuals reported 11,613 pregnancies. Study participants were randomized into two groups: group A comprised 2,458 respondents who answered questions on pregnancy planning, and group B comprised 2,327 individuals who answered questions on pregnancy wantedness (see the description of pregnancy intentions later in this article). Group A reported 5,910 pregnancies, and group B reported 5,703 pregnancies. From these 11,613 pregnancies, 10 were excluded for missing information on pregnancy intentions (six pregnancies described by four individuals in group A, and four pregnancies belonging to one individual in group B). The final sample includes 11,603 pregnancies (5,904 in group A and 5,699 in group B).

Pregnancy Intentions

Our outcome variable was pregnancy intentions assessed using different question wordings. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two different sets of questions assessing their own and their partner’s pregnancy intentions for each pregnancy. The first group was asked, “Had you planned this pregnancy?” and “Had your partner planned this pregnancy?” The translation of the exact wording of the French question (*Aviez vous prévu cette grossesse?*) lies between the terms “foreseen” and “planned.” For the sake of simplicity, we will refer to the term “pregnancy planning” in the rest of the article. The second group was asked, “Had you wanted this pregnancy?” and “Had your partner wanted this pregnancy?” The translation of the exact wording of the French question (*Souhaitiez vous cette grossesse?*) lies between the terms “wished for” and “wanted.” Again, for the sake of simplicity, we will refer to the term “pregnancy wantedness” in the rest of the article. The five response options—“Didn’t think about it,” “Not at all,” “Later,” “Sooner,” and “At that time”—were the same for both questions (Table 1). We defined a five-item response indicator of pregnancy intentions and a dichotomous indicator, combining the response items “sooner” or “at that time” in the category “planned/wanted pregnancies,” and the three response items “not at all planned/wanted,” “planned/wanted later” or “I hadn’t thought about it” in the “unwanted/unplanned pregnancies” category.

For each pregnancy, respondents were asked about their use of contraception in the month of conception and the reasons for nonuse. Specifically, respondents were asked if they were doing anything to avoid a pregnancy in the month the pregnancy started, and if so what method they were using (15 different options were available, including natural and barrier methods) and the reasons why they thought the pregnancy occurred. For those who stated they were not using any form of contraception in the month of conception, a follow-up question was asked about the reasons for nonusage. Response items included “You wanted a child,” “You thought you were not at risk of pregnancy,” “You did not expect to have sexual intercourse,” “You had never used contraception before,” “You had no method off hand,” “You thought your partner was using protection,” or “Other reasons.” This information allowed further exploration of pregnancy intentions in connection with contraceptive behaviors. We constructed two

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