



Unintended fertility and the stability of coresidential relationships

Karen Benjamin Guzzo^{a,*}, Sarah R. Hayford^b

^a Department of Sociology, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403-0222, United States

^b School of Social and Family Dynamics, Arizona State University, P.O. Box 873701, Tempe, AZ 85287-3701, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 March 2011

Revised 22 December 2011

Accepted 12 March 2012

Available online 21 March 2012

Keywords:

Unintended fertility

Union stability

Cohabitation

Marriage

ABSTRACT

Having an unintended birth is associated with maternal and child health outcomes, the mother–child relationship, and subsequent fertility. Unintended fertility likely also increases the risk of union dissolution for parents, but it is unclear whether this association derives from a causal effect or selection processes and whether it differs by union type. This article uses data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth to compare union stability after intended and unintended births in coresidential relationships. Results show that coresidential couples are more likely to break up after an unintended first or higher-order birth than after an intended first or higher-order birth, even when accounting for stable unobserved characteristics using fixed-effects models. The negative association is stronger for marriages than cohabitations, despite the overall higher dissolution rate of cohabiting unions. We conclude that unintended fertility at any parity is disruptive for coresidential couples in ways that increase the risk of union dissolution.

© 2012 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

More than one third of births between 1997 and 2002 in the United States were unintended, including 23% of births to married women and 51% of births to cohabiting women (Chandra et al., 2005). Unintended birth rates in the US are higher than in other developed countries and have been stable and perhaps even increasing in the 1990s after showing declines in earlier decades (Finer and Henshaw, 2006; Morgan, 2003). Unintended fertility, especially unwanted fertility, is associated with negative health consequences for both mothers and children (Bustan and Coker, 1994; Hellerstedt et al., 1998; Hummer et al., 1995; Joyce et al., 2000; Marsiglio and Mott, 1988; Weller et al., 1987). Having a child much earlier than desired or when one does not want to have children at all can also influence later family and relationship behaviors and outcomes. For instance, unintended births are associated with less positive mother–child relationships (Barber et al., 1999; Nelson and O'Brien, 2012), and women with early unintended births are more likely to have subsequent unintended births (Guzzo and Hayford, 2011). There is also some evidence that unintended first births are negatively associated with union stability (Logan et al., 2007; Manning et al., 2004; National Campaign, 2008; Wu and Musick, 2008). However, variation in the effects of unintended births on union dissolution by parity or union type have not been studied. Moreover, the roles of causal mechanisms and selection processes in the association between unintended births and subsequent union stability have not been explored.

This analysis fills a gap in the empirical literature by comparing relationship outcomes after first and higher-order intended and unintended births in coresidential unions, disaggregating models by union type at first birth, and using fixed-effects models to assess the impact of stable unobserved individual and couple characteristics, using data from the

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 419 372 8306.

E-mail addresses: kguzzo@bgsu.edu (K.B. Guzzo), sarah.hayford@asu.edu (S.R. Hayford).

2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). We investigate the role of selection into unintended fertility in explaining the association between intendedness and union stability found in previous research.

2. Fertility, intentionality, and union dissolution

Three decades of research has shown that children are associated with greater marital stability (Cherlin, 1977; Heaton, 1990; Lillard and Waite, 1993; Morgan and Rindfuss, 1985; Waite et al., 1985; Waite and Lillard, 1991). Evidence from the US, Britain, and Canada suggests that cohabiting parents also have lower dissolution rates than cohabitators without children, although this association is less consistent than for married couples (Manning, 2004; Steele et al., 2005; Wu, 1995). Children are hypothesized to increase stability by increasing commitment to the relationship, by increasing relationship-specific investment, and by increasing the normative pressures against dissolution (Becker, 1981; Coleman, 1988; Friedman et al., 1994; Thornton, 1977). Some of the positive association between fertility and marital stability can also be attributed to selection, since less stable couples are likely to avoid childbearing, and relationship quality influences fertility behaviors (Lawrence et al., 2008; Rijken and Thomson, 2011). However, the stabilizing effect of childbearing has been found to persist even when selection is accounted for (Lillard and Waite, 1993).

The earlier literature on children and coresidential relationship outcomes does not consider possible differences in the impact of intended and unintended fertility on relationship dissolution, yet unintended births are likely to be far more disruptive than intended births and far less likely to represent commitment. The limited research comparing the stability of marriage and cohabiting unions for children finds that relationships are more likely to dissolve after unintended first births than intended first births (Manning et al., 2004; Wu and Musick, 2008). In addition, couples who have an unintended birth are more likely to transition out of a union in the 2 years following the birth than couples who have an intended birth (National Campaign, 2008).

There is likely to be a direct negative effect of unintended fertility on the stability of coresidential unions. Early childhood tends to be a stressful time for parents, with high physical demands of caring for a child, increased financial pressures, and decreases in leisure time (including time spent on relationship-building). The impact of these increased demands may be larger for couples who did not plan to have children together. Relationship quality generally declines after a birth (Belsky and Rovine, 1990; Doss et al., 2009), and the decline is most sizeable among those with unintended fertility (Cox et al., 1999; Lawrence et al., 2008). Qualitative research reports mixed feelings among women – unplanned pregnancies may increase commitment (Kendall et al., 2005), but they also introduce stress into a relationship (Lifflander et al., 2007). Even women who feel closer to their partners during an unintended pregnancy may experience increased conflict after the baby is born (Kendall et al., 2005). Although there is evidence that birth planning status affects marital stability as well as satisfaction (Cowan and Cowan, 2000), most studies examining union stability and the transition to parenthood have focused on marriages, and intentionality has either been ignored or measured inconsistently (e.g., Doss et al., 2009; Lawrence et al., 2008; Twenge et al., 2003).

Couple disagreement on birth intentionality, which is fairly common (Williams, 1994; Korenman et al., 2002) but has not been explored in prior work, may also impact coresidential union dissolution. During the period 1997–2001, an estimated 22% of mothers – including 29% of those cohabiting and 18% of those married at the time of the birth – reported that they and the baby's father did not agree on whether the birth was intended or they did not know the father's feelings toward the birth (Chandra et al., 2005). In terms of union stability, couples who disagree on intentionality likely fall somewhere between couples who agree the birth was intended and couples who agree the birth was unintended. When at least one partner intended the birth, that person may feel prepared to take on the roles and duties of parenthood and can ease the burden for the other partner by helping them adjust and cope. Still, the other partner is likely to be displeased, and there is sometimes distrust between partners, where one partner feels “trapped” by the birth (Edin and Kefalas, 2005). Thus, we hypothesize that an elevated risk of instability persists when even only one partner feels a birth was unintended.

As noted by Lawrence et al. (2008), higher-parity births may have an independent and separate impact on relationship quality and stability, yet few studies distinguish between the transition to parenthood and having additional children. Certainly, births beyond the first may impact stability, with multiple unintended births likely to be particularly disruptive and stressful; a growing body of evidence suggests that women with early unintended births are at increased risk of having subsequent unintended births as well (Guzzo and Hayford, 2011; Wildsmith et al., 2010). Having another child quickly after the first child may overwhelm a couple, especially for those whose first child was unintended, even if they ultimately wanted to have more children in the future. Having an unplanned child several years after a couple has completed their desired family size may be equally disruptive. To our knowledge, no empirical research assesses how the sequencing of intended and unintended births is associated with union stability, though Nelson and O'Brien (2012) find that mothers with unplanned higher-parity births had higher levels of early parenting stress than first-time mothers with an unplanned birth.

Although we expect that unintended fertility is negatively associated with union stability for all relationships, it is likely to be more strongly associated with the stability of cohabiting unions than marital unions. Compared to married couples, cohabiting couples tend to report lower levels of relationship quality and commitment and have lower expectations about the permanency of their union (Brown and Booth, 1996; Nock, 1995; Smock, 2000). Further, although marriage is undeniably undergoing major changes (Cherlin, 2004), cohabitation remains far less institutionalized than marriage (Thornton et al., 2007), with roles, obligations, and social norms less clearly defined. Relative to married individuals, cohabitators report lower

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/955940>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/955940>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)