

PLEASURE, PROPHYLAXIS, AND PROCREATION

A qualitative analysis of intermittent contraceptive use and unintended pregnancy

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*November 5, 2007
APHA Annual Meeting
Washington, DC*

Overview of Presentation

- Overview of the relevant literature and its gaps
- Study methodology
- Findings: three categories of pleasure related to pregnancy ambivalence
- Conclusions and Implications

Overview and Introduction

- Unintended pregnancy remains a salient policy concern
- Although the socio-demographic patterns of unintended pregnancy (UP) are well documented, the psychological predictors are less clear
- One possible explanation behind lack of contraceptive use: pregnancy ambivalence (Bruckner et al. 2004; Crosby et al. 2002; Frost et al. 2007; Iuliano et al. 2006; Sable et al. 2000; Zabin et al. 1993 & Zabin 1999)

Remaining Gaps

- Few studies of pregnancy ambivalence explore the social, sexual, and emotional processes at work in shaping pregnancy ambivalence
- In particular, we know little about whether unprotected and/or pregnancy ambivalence may be pleasurable or may heighten the sexual experience
- In contrast, researchers have begun to consider the psychosocial benefits of taking HIV-related risks

Research Question

To what degree do women and men find pleasure in the possibility of pregnancy with a particular partner, how does this help people meet certain sexual, social, and emotional needs, and how can this explain contraceptive use and unintended pregnancy?

Methods

- In-depth, open-ended sexual history interviews conducted with 36 respondents from metro Atlanta
 - 24 women, 12 men
 - Half middle class, half poor/working class
- Strategic sampling used to capture other variables of interest (age, relationship status, parity, race/ethnicity)

Overview of Respondents

	Poor/working class women	Middle class women	Men (half poor/working class, half middle class)	Total
Ever married	4 (33%)	3 (25%)	5 (42%)	12 (33%)
Never married	8 (67%)	9 (75%)	7 (58%)	24 (67%)
Average age	36	36	32	35
White	3 (25%)	8 (67%)	6 (50%)	17 (47%)
African American	9 (75%)	4 (33%)	6 (50%)	19 (53%)
Parents	6 (50%)	4 (33%)	3 (25%)	13 (36%)
Non-parents	6 (50%)	8 (67%)	9 (75%)	23 (64%)
Total # children	18	7	7?	32
Total # pregnancies	25	13	11 (12+?)	49 (50+)

Results, Part 1: Overview of Unintended Pregnancy Among Respondents

	Poor/working class women	Middle class women	Men	Total
# of children	18	7	7 (?)	32+
# of pregnancies	25	13	11 (12+)	49 (50+)
# (%) with at least one UP	9 (75%)	5 (42%)	3 (25%) (6 (50%)?)	18 (53%)
# of UPs	16	6	6 (11?)	28 (34)
# (%) pregnancies unintended	16 (64%)	5 (39%)	6 (55%)	28 (57%)
# (%) of abortions	6 (38%)	4 (67%)	2 (33%) (?)	12 (43%)
# (%) of births	9 (56%)	0 (0%)	3 (50%) (?)	12 (43%)
# (%) of miscarriages	1 (6%)	2 (33%)	1 (17%) (?)	4 (6%)

* *Italics represent unconfirmed by likely pregnancies*

Results, Part 2: Relationships between Pleasure and Unintended Pregnancy

- Ambivalent desire for pregnancy:
 - 1) Active eroticization of pregnancy risk
 - 2) Passive eroticization of risk
- 3) Desire to be “swept away” by an unintended pregnancy

(1) Active eroticization of pregnancy risk

- Sometimes an individual or couple didn't intend a child, but was aroused by the idea of pregnancy in the heat of the moment
- The idea of a baby could be appealing even if the reality of a child was not
- Pregnancy fantasies could foster connection with a partner or indulge one's own procreation potential
- Most likely to occur in long term relationships, but not always

Alexandra, 28, middle class:

Sometimes, when I was having sex with him, I would just kind of lose my mind a little bit and want to have a baby with him so badly. It was like I can't get close enough to him or connected enough with him, and conceiving a child would be the closest we could get.

It seemed amazing that we could create this, this life together. And I suppose part of us did want to keep [the pregnancy], especially since at that point we imagined we'd be together forever. It was...romantic to imagine building a permanent life with him. But I was in my first year of law school. I wasn't ready to have a child. I wasn't ready to give up my plans.

Martin, 38, poor/working class:

I certainly realized she could get pregnant. [Pause.] In a way, I was hoping she would.

Interviewer: What made you interested in getting her pregnant?

She was real pretty. Looked like an Indian. Her attitude was just lovely. I felt like it would be nice to have a baby with a person like that.

(2) Passive eroticization of pregnancy risk

- Sometimes, a baby was neither consciously intended nor unintended
- A more passive desire for a pregnancy, as in “not not wanted,” or sometimes, wanted in the future
- Unprotected sex could help people feel connected with their partners and/or could relieve them of fertility decisions (leaving them “up to fate”)
- Also more common within the context of long term relationships

Joseph, 30, poor/working class:

Well, we could have children. We did think about it. Just not right then. If I don't know a girl at all, I'll definitely use a condom. But if I've been with a girl for a while, and if we're really into each other... [Pause.] A pregnancy wouldn't have been terrible, even though we weren't trying to have kids.

Lydia, 32, middle class:

I was relieved, but also sad. I had almost gotten excited about the idea of making a baby with him. It was something I wanted to do with him, just not right then.

(3) Escapist pleasure of being 'swept away' by a pregnancy

- Even when not planning or even hoping for a baby, several respondents came to embrace unintended pregnancy as a way to:
 - Foster relationships
 - Cultivate a new family
 - Potentially escape the hardships of one's current life
- Only described by poor and working class women, who had different educational and employment opportunities than middle class women, and who depended on men for social affirmation at young ages
- Not a new finding. But here we frame this phenomenon as part of a broader model of the pleasures of pregnancy even in the absence of active desire for a child

Destiny, 25, poor/working class:

At first, I was sad and worried. I thought, 'What my mama gonna do to me?' I wanted to keep going to school, but I also loved him and wanted to have his child.

It was scary, you know, being pregnant at 14. [My partner] was excited, though, and this meant a lot. I got ready to have his baby.

Rose, 50, poor/working class:

I couldn't get the things I needed. I had five dresses to wear for seven days of the week. There were some basic things I didn't have then. The Magnolia Ballroom—it was a place where I could just...get away. Get nice things. He bought them for me. New clothes. Jewelry sometimes. Flowers. He gave me something to ease me from what I had at home. Something to get me away. Have better things in life. I only had five dresses.

I felt good when I found out I was pregnant. I felt like...I knew I had wanted to have children at some point. I wanted out of my mother's house. I wanted to make a family. [Pause.] Sometime it don't work out like that.

Conclusions

- Active erotization of pregnancy risk: upholds lit on barebacking among gay men, for whom desire for closeness, greater physical pleasure of skin-on-skin sex, or even hope for shared disease with one's partner may lead to condom-less sex
- Passive eroticization of pregnancy risk: upholds the notion of “passive preceptors” (Stanford et al. 2004) and the notion that unprotected sex can stem from feelings of love, romanticism or need for connection (Bartz et al. 2007)
- Pleasures of being swept away by an unintended pregnancy: in resource poor settings in which young women depended on men for social affirmation and financial support, unintended pregnancies could become imbued with optimism and promise

- Taken together: a heuristic for some of the sexual and emotional pleasures involved in creating a baby with someone, even when a child or the responsibilities of parenthood are not wholly intended
- Helps us understand how lack of contraceptive use isn't always a failure to do something (unmet need), but can help people achieve more immediate social, emotional, or sexual benefits

Implications

- Future behavioral studies of contraception should further explore how people can benefit psychologically, socially, and sexually from taking risks around pregnancy
- Much more work is needed on addressing pregnancy ambivalence at the clinical and/or programmatic level
- Wider recognitions of pleasure will do little to address structural inequality; we need to continue efforts to improve services and opportunities for socially disadvantaged women and men

