

## ABSTRACT

### Unintended Pregnancy and the Relationship Context

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#### Introduction

Nearly half of all pregnancies in the United States are unintended (Henshaw, 1998). This high rate has long been considered a serious problem, as unintended pregnancies pose higher risks to the health of women and children due to delays in seeking prenatal care or reaching other pregnancy resolution decisions, and births resulting from unintended pregnancy are associated with poorer child outcomes and opportunities for women (Institute of Medicine, 1995; Joyce & Grossman, 1990; Zuravin, 1991).

Increasingly, however, researchers are coming to recognize that the concept of unintended pregnancy as currently measured may not effectively capture women's true attitudes toward pregnancy (Campbell & Mosher, 2000; Santelli et al., 2003; Trussell, Vaughan, & Stanford, 1999). For example, whether or not women *want* a pregnancy may be quite distinct from whether or not they intended it, and may in fact be the more salient issue (Bachrach & Newcomer, 1999; Moos, Petersen, Meadows, & Melvin, 1997). Furthermore, researchers have increasingly recognized the importance of the context of women's lives to understanding their views of pregnancy (Klerman, 2000), in particular their relationships with their partners (Zabin, Huggins, Emerson, & Cullins, 2000). The concept of unintended pregnancy was originally developed in reference to married couples, on the premise that they would set a goal for the lifetime number of children they wanted to have and then aim to achieve that goal (Peterson & Mosher, 1999). The validity of this premise is increasingly doubtful, however, as women are now more likely to have a series of relationships throughout their lives and, rather than having a lifetime vision of the number of children they want to have, to consider in the context of each relationship whether or not they want to have a child (Klerman, 2000; Peterson & Mosher, 1999).

Despite the importance of the relationship context to understanding pregnancy intendedness, little research has delved into this issue. Some studies have explored the relationship between marital status and pregnancy intendedness, but have not attempted to characterize the relationships in more depth. A few studies suggest that the emotional and financial support from partners may influence women's perception of pregnancy wantedness (Fischer, Stanford, Jameson, & DeWitt, 1999; Kroelinger & Oths, 2000; Stanford, Hobbs, Jameson, DeWitt, & Fischer, 2000), and Zabin et al. found that relationship factors, such as how serious a relationship is and how many serious partners a woman has ever had, are significant determinants of pregnancy wantedness (Zabin et al., 2000). Still, little is understood about the characteristics of relationships that may place women at increased risk for unwanted pregnancy. This paper addresses this gap by exploring many facets of women's relationships with their partners and their relationship to unintended pregnancy. Furthermore, given the limitations of the traditional measure of unintended pregnancy, the analysis will use various measures of pregnancy wantedness and intendedness to determine how relationship factors affect different dimensions of pregnancy intendedness.

### **Unintended Pregnancy Study**

The purpose of this paper is to identify the characteristics of women's male partners and their relationships that increase the likelihood of unintended or unwanted pregnancy. Data are drawn from a study that integrated qualitative and quantitative methods to improve our understanding of the meanings and determinants of unintended pregnancies. This study was conducted between February and October 2000 as the third follow-up of the Longitudinal Study of Contraceptive Choice and Use Dynamics (LSCC), a panel survey that includes socio-demographic and detailed contraceptive and pregnancy histories for low-income, African-American and white women attending public family planning and postpartum clinics in Atlanta and Charlotte.

The third follow-up study focused specifically on the issue of unintended pregnancy. We first conducted qualitative research using a full complement of qualitative methods (focus groups, in-depth interviews, case studies, and ethnographic observation with women, men, and the women's mothers) to explore the meanings of unintended pregnancy to the women and men experiencing it; to learn how unintended pregnancies happen in their lives and how various factors are woven together in the fabric of their lives to lead them to prevent or experience unintended pregnancies; and to explore the larger environment in which these pregnancies occur. The qualitative research explored preliminary hypotheses and generated new ones about factors leading to unintended

pregnancy, and developed new measures of unintended pregnancy that more fully reflect the women's lived experiences.

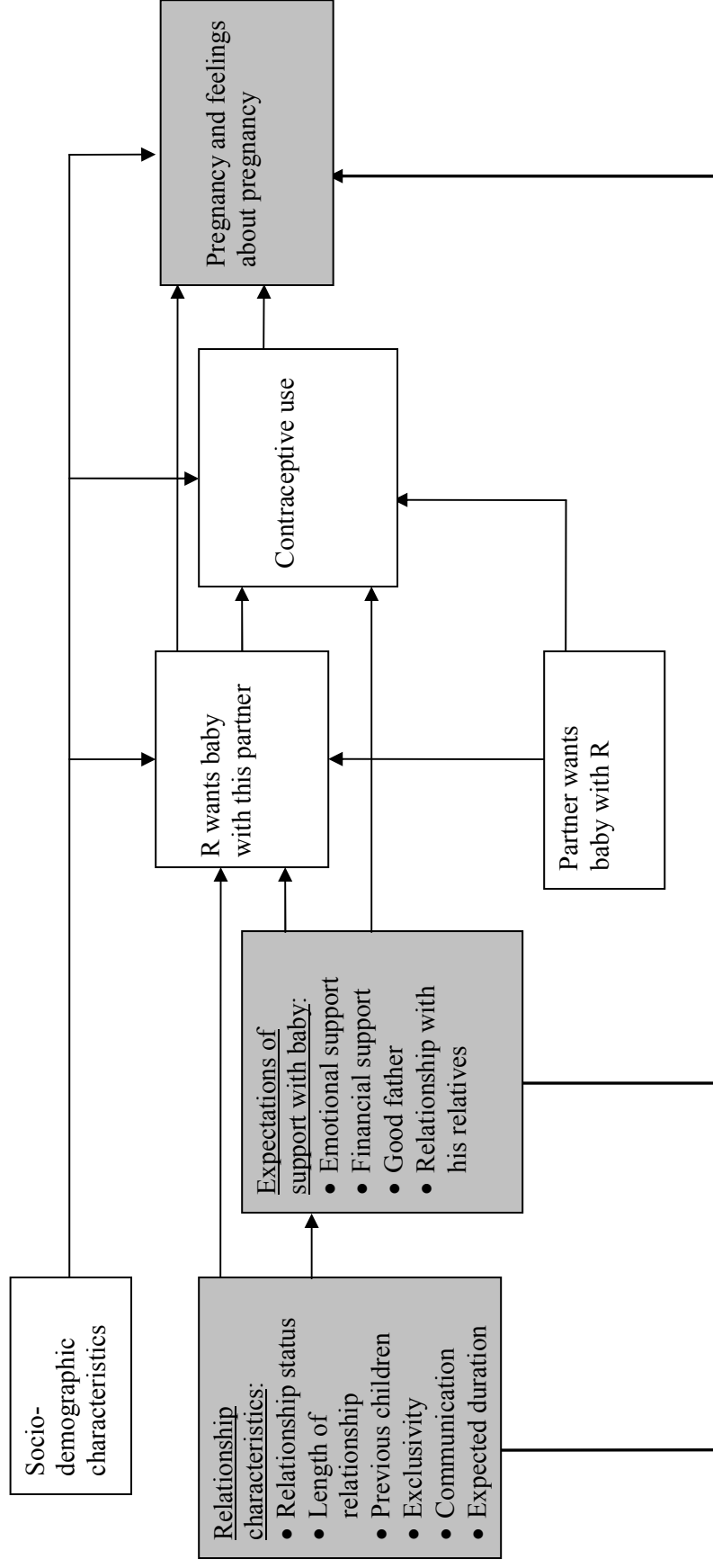
To test the hypotheses and new measures of unintended pregnancy, we developed a survey questionnaire incorporating the concepts and variables needed to operationalize the measures and test the hypotheses generated by the qualitative research. We conducted a series of cognitive interviews and a pretest of the questionnaire before administering it as the Third Follow-Up of the LSCC sample, from February through October, 2000. We completed interviews with 1,362 women or 91% of the women eligible for the Third Follow-Up survey--i.e., women interviewed in the Second Follow-Up who had not been sterilized by that round. (Response rates in each previous round were 87% or better.)

### **Relationship characteristics**

Analysis of the qualitative data suggested that women's desire for a pregnancy is influenced not only by their own life circumstances, but also by characteristics of their current partners and expectations for him as a father. The conceptual model for how relationship characteristics affect pregnancy intendedness and contraceptive use is shown in Figure 1. Sociodemographic factors such as age, education and parity affect the occurrence of pregnancy and how women feel about any pregnancies that occur. Relationship characteristics such as relationship status (married, cohabiting or non-cohabiting), previous children with this partner, the quality of the relationship, and expectations of support affect pregnancy and women's feelings about pregnancies that occur both directly and indirectly (through her desire for a pregnancy and contraceptive use).

We have conducted previous analyses exploring the effects of relationship characteristics and expectations on women's desire for a pregnancy with a given partner and on their contraceptive use. This paper will take the analysis the final step, to see how partner and relationship characteristics influence the likelihood of pregnancy and how women feel about any pregnancies that occur. We hypothesize that, regardless of marital status, women who are in good and stable relationships with their partners are more likely to get pregnant and more likely both to be happy about their pregnancies and to consider them intended. Women who have relationships that are not as good or are less stable are less likely to get pregnant, and they are more likely to be unhappy about any pregnancies that occur and to consider them either unintended or subintended.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Model**



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