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UNINTENDED CHILDBEARING AND MARITAL INSTABILITY:

AN EMPHASIS ON COUPLES' INTENTIONS

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Abstract

The birth of a child can negatively impact relationship functioning, especially if one or both partners did not intend to have a child. As such, unintended or disagreed-upon births may elevate the risk of dissolution. In this paper, we use the National Survey of Family Growth to consider how married couples characterize the intendedness of their first birth and examine its linkage with dissolution. Nearly one-third of first marital births are unintended by at least one parent. When fathers do not intend the birth, regardless of whether or not mothers do, couples report an elevated risk of dissolution.

Key words: couples; unintended childbearing; instability

Word count: 7,766

Introduction

Unintended childbearing (births that occur to individuals earlier than desired or to individuals who do not want any, or any more, births) in the United States is disproportionately concentrated among disadvantaged and unmarried parents (Finer & Henshaw, 2006; Finer & Zolna, 2011; Musick, England, Edginton, & Kangas, 2009). In addition, unintended childbearing is associated with poorer outcomes and lower well-being for both parents and children (Barber, Axinn, & Thornton, 1999; Lindberg, Maddow-Zimet, Kost, & Lincoln, 2015; Miller, Sable, & Beckmeyer, 2009), including an elevated risk of relationship instability (Guzzo & Hayford, 2012). The causal direction remains unclear, with evidence that disadvantage and weaker relationships both predict unintended childbearing and result from unintended childbearing (e.g., Lindberg, Maddow-Zimet, Kost, & Lincoln, 2015; Su, 2012). The association between unintended childbearing, poorer well-being, and relationship instability merit continued efforts to better understand the underlying processes at play.

This is especially true for marriage, a union which carries high expectations for childbearing (Koropecj-Cox & Pendell, 2007). Although childlessness within marriage is uncommon (Martinez, Daniels, & Chandra, 2012), not all married parents characterize their births as being wanted or occurring at the right time. Further, spouses may each have differing views about whether and when to have children, but research on unintended childbearing has focused heavily on unmarried couples or single mothers, largely excluding married couples. Indeed, most existing work on unintended childbearing and union instability has either (1) focused on unintended childbearing and transitions among cohabiting parents (Guzzo & Hayford, 2014; Manlove, Wildsmith, Ikramullah, Ryan, Holcombe, Scott, & Peterson, 2012) or (2) focused on birth intentions and union trajectories broadly without a specific focus on marital

instability (Guzzo & Hayford, 2012; Lichter, Michelmore, Turner, & Sassler, 2016; Maddow-Zimet, Lindberg, Kost, & Lincoln, 2016). Descriptively speaking, evidence justifies this approach, as over three-fourths of births to married women are intended compared to just over half of cohabiting births and one-third of single births (Guzzo, 2017). However, high levels of childbearing within marriage (Martinez, Daniels, & Chandra, 2012) coupled with a relatively high divorce rate (i.e., just under half according to Schoen, 2016) suggest that focused attention on how circumstances underlying the transition to parenthood within marriage is linked to dissolution (separation or divorce) is warranted. If childbearing among married couples is a normative expectation, then couples who have unintended births, or disagree about whether their births were intended, may be selectively different in a way that elevates their risk of instability.

Our analyses examine how married mothers retrospectively characterize the intendedness of their first birth and their perceptions of whether or not their husband also intended the birth. A couple-level approach draws attention to agreement between these characterizations (both intended, only the mother intended, only the father intended, and neither intended the birth), which we term “intention scenarios.” Drawing from the broader literature on unintended childbearing, we then examine which relationship and sociodemographic characteristics are associated with the likelihood of couples falling into different “intention scenarios” before moving on to analyze how these “intention scenarios” are differentially associated with the risk of dissolution. Our findings make noteworthy contributions to existing research on marital childbearing and marital instability. First and foremost, we show that first marital births are not universally desired by both husbands and wives. Second, multivariate findings suggest that “intention scenarios” are strongly linked to key relationship factors, particularly the timing of conception relative to the timing of marriage. Third, consideration of couples’ intentions within a

multivariate framework indicates that when the mother perceives her partner did not intend the birth, there is an elevated risk of instability regardless of whether she did, or did not, intend the birth.

Background

Insights from a couple-level perspective

A large literature examines unintended childbearing, often focusing not just on its correlates and consequences, but also on its measurement (e.g., Guzzo & Hayford, 2014; Kost & Zolna, 2019; Santelli et al, 2009). Unintended childbearing is generally measured retrospectively, with women reporting their recollection of whether, when they got pregnant, they wanted to have a baby at all and if they wanted to have a baby at that time. Despite some concerns that many women might be unwilling to report an existing child as unintended (Joyce, Kaestner, & Korenman, 2000) or that question wording assumes women ever had clear notions of when they wanted to have a child (Aiken et al., 2016), recent work indicates that retrospective approaches to unintended childbearing are both meaningful and reliable (Santelli et al., 2009) .

Although extensive research considers issues of measurement, another central limitation of much of this research has received less attention: the focus on whether *mothers* consider a birth intended. Most existing work has conceptualized unintended childbearing as an individual-level construct (Stykes, 2018), yet childbearing is fundamentally a couple-level behavior. Notable exceptions have pointed to the unique insights of a couple-level approach to unintended childbearing (Hohmann-Marriott, 2009; Martin, McNamara, & Milot, 2007; Moore, Ryan, Manlove, Mincieli, & Schelar, 2009; Korenman, Kaestner, & Joyce, 2002; Saleem & Surkan, 2014). In the context of marital childbearing, we assert that consideration of couples' intentions is especially salient given the normative (though admittedly weakening) expectation that married

couples should have children and that having a child, as a married couple, is a way to create a new family unit (Axinn & Thornton, 2000; Koropeckyj-Cox & Tendall, 2007; Townsend, 2002). Married couples are more likely to have shared interests and expectations and, as such, to agree on major family decisions, like childbearing (Hohmann-Marriott, 2009). Marriage is a long-term commitment, and childbearing within marriage is a signal and an investment in the longevity of the union. To that end, married couples who experience an unintended marital birth or disagree on the intendedness of that birth flout normative expectations, that married couples make joint decisions, and may experience problems that signal underlying relationship troubles, or both.

Unintended childbearing among couples

A wealth of scholarship describes the sociodemographic correlates of unintended childbearing and consistently notes that it is disproportionately concentrated among younger adults, racial-ethnic minorities, less educated, and poorer individuals (Finer & Henshaw, 2006; Finer & Zolna, 2011; Musick et al. 2009), along with unmarried couples (Finer & Zolna, 2011; Guzman, Wildsmith, Manlove, and Franzetta, 2010). As we argue in this paper, though, married may also experience both unintended childbearing and disagreement about whether a birth was intended. Recent estimates suggest that almost one-in-five marital births is characterized as unintended by mothers (Guzzo, 2017); adding in fathers' reports will likely raise that proportion even higher.

Few marriage-specific characteristics have been linked to the likelihood of couples' views on whether their shared births are intended, but relationship factors may be even more important than sociodemographic factors, among a more selective, married sample. For instance, the timing of conception relative to marriage is likely a key factor in determining whether births are characterized as unintended by one or both partners. Despite the declining need to legitimize of births conceived outside of marriage (a situation colloquially known as 'shotgun marriages'),

births in the early months of marriage remain common (Hayford, Guzzo, & Smock, 2014; Gibson-Davis & Rackin, 2014). Nonmarital births are often unintended, which suggests that nonmarital conceptions (including those that result in marital births) are also more likely to be unintended by one or both partners. Further, even births resulting from marital conceptions may be unintended if they occur early in the marriage, to the extent that couples who have not been married long have little time to adjust to married life and spousal roles before transitioning to parenthood.

Past relationship experiences are also likely relevant. Since many cohabiting couples break up rather than transition to marriage (Guzzo, 2014; Lamidi, Manning, & Brown, 2019), married couples who cohabited beforehand may be particularly committed to each other and have had more time to establish their partnership. As a result, married parents who cohabited prior to marriage are more likely to agree that their birth was intended than those did not live together prior to marriage. Prior, failed relationships with other partners, though, suggests difficulty in managing relationships, which may extend to the current relationship and elevate the risk that births are unintended by one or both partners, as would marriages in which one partner has a child from a past relationship (Guzzo, 2018).

In short, not all marital births are intended, and consideration of couples' experiences will likely reveal even higher estimates of unintended childbearing among married couples than estimates based on just one partner (usually the wife/mother). Drawing from existing research, we expect that married couples who are older, better educated, white, did not report premarital conceptions, and only cohabited with their spouse prior to marriage are more likely to both intend the birth than their counterparts with less sociodemographic privilege and more complex relationship histories.

Couples' "intention scenarios" and marital instability

Married couples with children are more stable than those without them (Lillard & Waite, 1993; Waite & Lillard, 1991), but unintended childbearing has also been linked to less stable relationships (Guzzo & Hayford, 2012; Lichter et al., 2016; Maddow-Zimmer et al., 2016). Why might this be the case? Both selection and causal mechanisms are plausible in understanding how intendedness of a first, shared birth is associated with marital instability. There are two reasons related to selection. One, unintended childbearing is more common among younger, minority, and economically disadvantaged individuals (Finer & Zolna, 2016) and those having more complex union histories (Guzzo, 2018). These same characteristics are, in turn, linked to marital instability (Amato, 2010). Two, a selection perspective suggests that because childbearing in a marriage is both common and strongly expected, there is something unique about married couples who do *not* intend to become parents together that represents an underlying issue that may elevate the risk of instability. Here, unintended childbearing or spousal disagreement in intentions could appear as a symptom of a strained relationship, difficulty in communication, or economic insecurity – which are associated with marital instability. If issues of selection are the primary driver of both unintended/ disagreed-up on childbearing and marital dissolution, then there would be no consistent, significant associations between couples' intentions and marital instability net of sociodemographic characteristics and relationship characteristics.

A causal perspective suggests that experiencing an unintended, marital birth, or spousal disagreement in intentions, directly increases the risk of instability. An established body of research has linked the transition to parenthood with reductions in relationship quality (Doss & Rhoades, 2017; Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). Children are time- and labor-intensive, and moving from a dyadic relationship in which the romantic connection between

partners is the central focus to a triad in which the new member demands most of the partners' energy can be disruptive. The strains and stressors relationships face in response to a birth are likely higher when one or both partners did not intend the birth, to the extent that partners may feel unprepared for the responsibilities and changes that accompany parenthood. Moreover, these strains and stressors may increase the risk of conflict among couples.

We are not the first to consider the association between couple-level indicators of unintended childbearing and relationship stability. Guzzo and Hayford (2012) demonstrated that couples' disagreement about birth intentions were associated with greater instability for marriages than for cohabiting unions, but the authors did not explore this association further to consider if it mattered which partner did not intend the birth, nor did they provide extensive consideration of why disagreement may be linked to instability. A gendered lens helps to understand why marital instability would be elevated when couples disagree or experience unintended childbearing— which parent (mother or father) considered the birth to be unintended. Since mothers continue to spend more time in childrearing tasks (Milkie, Raley, & Bianchi, 2009), marriages may be most unstable when mothers do not intend the birth. Even when the father intended the birth (and would be expected to be an involved/supportive co-parent), mothers who were unprepared for childbearing may find the new responsibilities and strains of parenthood (e.g., lack of sleep, loss of freedom, and so on) especially burdensome, increasing the risk of relationship dissolution, relative to mothers who intended the birth. Alternatively, Townsend's (2002) interviews suggested that men see marriage and fatherhood as linked. Based this perspective, a married mother who intended the birth but perceives that her husband did not might receive less support from the father in childrearing, which could in turn foster a sense of resentment, and increase the risk of instability.

Using mothers' proxy reports

One of the challenges to research on couple-level approaches to unintended childbearing concerns data availability and quality. Despite the recognition that childbearing usually occurs within couples, couple-level data (drawing on information from both mothers and fathers) are rare and often limited to more socio-demographically privileged samples, which is a concern for studies of unintended childbearing given its concentration among more disadvantaged parents. A common alternative is to use mothers' proxy reports of their partners' intentions, where mothers report whether they believe their partners wanted the birth at that time. Although there are reasonable concerns about whether mothers can accurately identify their partners' intentions, Stykes' (2018) recent analyses of couple-level data demonstrated that a majority – about three-fourths – of married mothers' proxy reports were accurate representations of fathers' intentions. Further, this work showed that when proxy reports are inaccurate, the bias produced downwardly biased estimates of disagreement in intentions (that is, less disagreement), which should result in conservative estimates for the association between couples' intentions and dissolution. Moreover, it seems that even if a mother's perceptions of a father's intentionality differ from his own reports, her *perception* that he did not intend the birth could be associated with a greater risk of marital dissolution, regardless of the proxy report's accuracy per se.

Current Study

Research has linked unintended childbearing, relationship dynamics (e.g., union formation and stability), and well-being. Yet, we assert this scholarship has, at times, treated unintended childbearing as synonymous with nonmarital childbearing through its methodological decisions and guiding research questions. As a result, much about unintended childbearing among married couples remains unknown, which is a notable shortcoming given a strong association between

unintended childbearing and marital instability (see Guzzo & Hayford, 2012). We also suggest, that in the context of marriage, intentions are best modeled as a couple-level construct. Our analyses contribute to the body of work on unintended fertility and well-being by examining which sociodemographic and relationship characteristics predict couples' "intention scenarios" (as reported by mothers) for first, marital births. Next, we consider the association between "intention scenarios" and the risk of dissolution, while controlling for a rich set of relationship and sociodemographic characteristics that have been linked to both unintended childbearing and dissolution, representing selective mechanisms. If, after controlling for these characteristics, an association remains between "intention scenarios" and the risk of instability, such an association suggests that causal processes might be at play.

Data and Method

We use the 2006-2015 cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), a nationally representative sample of men and women aged 15-44. Detailed cohabitation, marriage, and childbearing histories make these data well-suited for analyses of childbearing and union outcomes. Women (but not men) characterize the intendedness and wantedness of each birth for both themselves and their partners (see specific wording below). As such, we restrict our analysis to married women. These data are the only nationally representative public-use data set that can readily consider couples' intentions and its association with marital instability over a longer duration (via exhaustive marital histories with specific dates of transitions).

Pooled data from the 2006-2015 pregnancy files identify 39,393 pregnancies among women. We apply three sample restrictions to further restrict our analytic sample. First, analyses are limited to live, first births ($n = 10,157$). Then, we limit the sample to women with valid responses to both mothers' and fathers' childbearing intentions (described below), excluding

“didn’t care/indifferent” and “don’t know” responses (n = 9,264). Lastly, to focus on married couples, we include only mothers who were married at the time of their first birth (n = 3,963). To address the second research question, predicting marital instability (defined as separation or divorce, taken from the union formation and dissolution histories), we use event history analyses. In this approach, duration drives ‘exposure’ to dissolution, and so we transform the data file to analyze the risk of dissolution over time. Specifically, we move away from the 3,963 mothers as the unit of analysis by transforming the data into person-months, where we estimate the risk of dissolution from the month of the first birth until the month respondents are no longer ‘observed’ (i.e., censored) because they have experienced dissolution, their firstborn child (the birth of interest in the analysis) has turned 18, or the time of the interview (so the marriage is still intact).

Measures

Couples’ “intention scenarios”: The NSFG asks women a series of questions to assess childbearing intentions. First, respondents were asked, “Right before you became pregnant, did you yourself want to have a(nother) baby at any time in the future?” Respondents who reply ‘yes’ are then asked a follow-up question to assess the timing of the pregnancy, “So would you say you became pregnant too soon, at about the right time, or later than you wanted?” A similar series of questions were asked for female respondents’ perceptions of the child’s father. Based on these questions, both mothers’ and fathers’ intentions were operationalized as a categorical indicator with two responses: intended (births that were wanted and on time or later than intended) and unintended (either unwanted or too soon). Mothers’ intentions were then cross-referenced to her perception of the father’s intentions to create a couple-level indicator of couples’ “intention scenarios”: both parents intended the birth (reference), only the mother intended the birth, only the father intended the birth, and neither parent intended the birth.

Relationship characteristics: Analyses include an indicator of timing of contraception via a series of dummy variables: contraception after the first year of marriage (reference), at least six months prior to marriage, one to six months prior to marriage, within the first six months of marriage, and within the first seven to 12 months of marriage. We also include binary indicators that identify cohabitation with their spouse prior to marriage or those who experienced a prior residential union with a different partner and a continuous indicator of mothers' age at first birth. A binary indicator illustrated if the female respondents' husband reported prior children (recall that for the female respondent, this is their first birth). In the analysis of dissolution, we also include a continuous time-varying variable that indicates the number of additional children the couple had after the first birth; that is, during the first month of observation in the person-month file, this is indicated by a "0" and remains a "0" for each subsequent month until another child is born, at which point is coded "1" and remains so for each subsequent month until another child is born and so on. The dissolution models also control for months since birth (a time-varying measure that increases monotonically for each subsequent month after birth).

Sociodemographic characteristics: Racial and ethnic status is operationalized as a categorical variable with four responses: white (reference), black, Hispanic, and "other" (including multiracial/ethnic). Educational attainment is coded as a categorical indicator of the female respondent's highest level of education (at the time of interview): at least a bachelor's degree (reference), some college experience, high school diploma/GED, and no degree. Maternal family background factors include the respondent's mother's education (using the same coding scheme as the female respondent's education) and a binary indicator of whether the mother who lived with married biological/adoptive parents during. Lastly, all models control for five-year birth cohorts (since the risk of instability has changed over time).

Analytic Strategy

Analyses proceed in two stages. We begin documenting variation in couples' intentions among first, marital births. After presenting descriptive statistics, multinomial logistic regression analyses predict "intention scenarios." The second set of analyses links "intention scenarios" to risk of dissolution using the person-month data file. Life tables, which estimate the cumulative risk of dissolution by month, provide a descriptive illustration of how marital instability varies by couples' intentions. Then, we consider marital instability via a series of discrete-time event history regression models using logistic regression, as the outcome variable is a binary measure of dissolved or not. In both sets of multivariate analyses, Model 1 includes only "intention scenarios," and subsequent models introduce relationship characteristics, and sociodemographic characteristics.

Results

Variation in married couples' childbearing intentions

Table 1 reports the characteristics of women experiencing a first, marital birth overall and across "intention scenarios." Substantial variation exists in couples' intentions. Approximately three-in-ten first, marital births were unintended by at least one of the birth parents, with 15% of first, marital births unintended by both parents. Similar shares of these births were only intended by mothers or fathers (i.e., 7% and 9%, respectively). Descriptive findings demonstrate that marital births are neither homogenous nor synonymous with intended childbearing.

[Table 1 about here]

Overall, women with first, marital births are, as shown elsewhere (Stykes, 2018), a somewhat privileged sample in terms of racial/ethnic status and level of education. But there are important variations across "intention scenarios." A key difference seems to be the conception

of births – premarital conception is more common among couples where neither parent intended the birth. A number of other characteristics differ according to couples’ intentions. Notably, couples where both parents intended the birth are, on average, older than all other “intention scenarios,” but mothers reported similar ages at first birth in couples where only the father or neither parent intended the birth. On average, couples where the mother did not intend the birth report more additional children than those where both intended the birth (1.4 versus 1.1 additional children). White mothers are notably underrepresented (i.e., 48% versus 66%) among couples where only the father intended the birth, which are disproportionately Hispanic (i.e., 36% versus 20%). Couples where the mother intended the birth (i.e., both intended or only mother intended) reported higher levels of education than their counterparts where the mother did not intend the birth. Lastly, consideration of family of origin suggested mothers who reported both parents intended the birth came from families where their own mothers had higher levels of education, on average, and a larger share were reared by married, biological (incl. adoptive) parents.

[Table 2 about here]

Regression analyses (see Table 2) align with the bivariate associations discussed above, so we focus our discussion of findings on the result in Model 2 (i.e., the full model). Note that relatively few characteristics that distinguish whether both parents intended the birth vs. only the mother intended birth, whereas there are clear differences in whether only the father or neither parent intended the birth relative to whether both parents intended the birth. Moreover, it seems that relationship characteristics are far better predictors of couples’ “intention scenarios” than sociodemographic characteristics, among married couples.

The relative timing of conception to marriage emerges as a key factor in distinguishing couples where only the father or neither parent intended the birth (rather than both parents). This pattern of coefficients suggests that couples may enter marriage in response to an unintended conception (i.e., often referred to as shotgun marriage). However, this pattern was less robust when contrasting couples where only the mother (versus both parents) intended the birth. Relationship histories are also associated with couples' "intention scenarios." Premarital cohabitation (with the current spouse) is associated with greater odds of both parents intending the birth than only the mother or father intending it. As expected, prior unions with a different partner and younger ages at first birth are both associated with an elevated risk of: (1) only the father or (2) neither parent intending the birth rather than both parents intending the birth. Mothers whose spouses reported prior biological children reported a greater risk of only the father (rather than both parents) intending the birth.

Couples' "intention scenarios" and marital instability

Figure 1 illustrates variation in marital stability in the ten years following a marital first birth by couples' "intention scenarios."¹ Approximately, one-in-four women, who were married at the time of their first birth, experienced a marital dissolution within 10 years of having the birth. As expected, though, couples where both parents intended the birth report the highest levels of marital stability (with 80% enduring a decade after the birth). In contrast, couples where either the mother did not intend the birth or neither parent intended the birth report the greatest instability (with only approximately 60% enduring a decade after the birth).

[Figure 1 about here]

¹ The decision to present life table estimates a decade after the first birth is convenient, though admittedly somewhat arbitrary. Multivariate analyses consider marital instability through the firstborn child's 18th birthday.

Logistic, discrete time event-history analyses presented in Table 3 demonstrate which factors are associated with dissolution after experiencing a first, marital birth. Consistent with Figure 1, significant variation exists in couples' intentions and marital instability. Consideration across models provides evidence in support of both causal and selection arguments for the association between couples' intentions and dissolution depending on the intention scenario. Among married couples where *only the mother* intended the birth, minimal change in the odds ratio across models (from 1.37** to 1.33*), suggests that causal mechanisms are at play, since the association with dissolution remains, net of a host of characteristics. In contrast, for couples where only *the father* (versus both parents) intending the birth, the elevated risk of dissolution is reduced to insignificance (from 1.80*** to 1.24) given the inclusion of relationship characteristics, which suggests selection is at play rather than causation in this intention scenario. Lastly, consideration of neither parents' intending the birth and instability provides evidence of both causal and selection mechanisms. Once again, neither parents' intending the birth is associated with higher odds of dissolution. The inclusion of additional characteristics attenuates the odds ratio by 22% (from 1.68*** to 1.30**), but a significant association remains net of covariates. Based on these findings, we conclude that while selection processes are at play, there is indirect evidence in support of a causal link between unintended childbearing and marital instability. When *the father* (versus both parents) does not intend the birth, regardless of whether the mother does, an elevated risk of dissolution remains even in the presence of a rich set of sociodemographic and relationship characteristics.

[Table 3 about here]

Consistent with prior research, a number of factors apart from couples' childbearing intentions are associated with the risk of marital instability. Notably, mothers who had prior

unions with different partners, those who were younger at the time of first birth, and those whose husband had prior children reported a greater risk of dissolution. The relative timing of conception to marriage was not associated with the risk of marital instability apart from its selection into couples' "intention scenarios." Once again, few sociodemographic characteristics were associated with the risk of dissolution, net of relationship characteristics. However, mothers who reported moderate levels of education (some college experience but no degree) and those who were not reared by two married biological (or adoptive) parents reported a higher risk of marital instability.

Discussion

A wealth of recent scholarship in family sociology has examined unintended childbearing as a social problem, with the potential to reproduce structural inequalities and widen disparities in health and well-being (Barber et al., 1999; Lindberg et al., 2015; Musick et al. 2009). Separately, researchers have consistently linked unintended childbearing with less stable relationships (Guzzo & Hayford, 2012; Lichter et al. 2016; Maddow-Zimet et al., 2016). Congruent with the decoupling of marriage and childbearing, much of what we know about unintended childbearing has *focused* on unintended childbearing among unmarried parents. Although such an approach appears justified in that married couples are expected to have children, we cannot assume that all marital births are intended, especially when nearly half of all marriages in the U.S. end in divorce (Schoen, 2016). As married couples with children are: (1) more stable than those without, and (2) unintended childbearing increases the risk of dissolution, a closer examination of the association between couples' childbearing intentions and marital instability addresses a blind spot in our current understanding of childbearing and marriage.

In this paper, we extend prior work on unintended childbearing and relationships to investigate how married mothers and fathers perceive their first, shared birth and how this relates to dissolution. Our work is innovative in that we leverage a couple-level approach and focus exclusively on married couples. Findings reveal substantial heterogeneity in married parents' childbearing intentions. Three-in-ten marital, first births were unintended by at least one partner, and the observed variation in couples' "intention scenarios" reflect differences in relationship characteristics as well as mothers' sociodemographic characteristics. This variation, in turn, is also linked to dissolution. Married couples in which mothers perceive that their husbands did not want their first birth (either at all, or at that time), even if the mother herself intended the birth, are far more likely to experience instability than couples in which mothers report that both they and their husbands wanted to have their first child at that time. Moreover, this association remains quite robust to the inclusion of a host of control characteristics. Thus, we interpret our findings as providing indirect support for a causal association. When married mothers perceive that their husbands did not want their first child, or at least did not want the child at that time, relationship processes and interactions appear to suffer.

A gendered lens provides informative insight when disagreement in couples' intentions occurs. Recall, we found more evidence in support of a causal relationship when only the mother intended the birth. In contrast, selection processes appear responsible for linkage between only the father intended the birth and instability. In-depth interviews have illustrated that men view marriage and fatherhood as interwoven, and when coupled with stable employment and home ownership, a successful demonstration of masculinity (Townsend, 2002). Further, Townsend (2002) and others (e.g., Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005; Milkie et al., 2009), have asserted that cultural expectations for fathers have shifted to involve emotional attachment and engagement beyond

mere economic support. To that end, a mother's perception that the father did not intend a birth, when she did, could certainly become a source of strain in the marriage and increase the likelihood of dissolution. Separately, we suggest that the lack of causal evidence in linking only the father's intending the birth with dissolution aligns with emergent evidence that a father's intending the birth (when the mother does not) may buffer the negative associations of unintended childbearing (see Hohmann-Marriot, 2009; Martin et al., 2007).

Our analyses make important contributions to existing research. However, they are certainly not without limitations. The reliance of mothers' proxy reports of fathers' intentions is not ideal. However, we are unaware of any data that can facilitate a truly couple-level approach to a nationally representative sample of unintended childbearing and marital instability and over a sufficiently long timeframe to study dissolution. Yet, prior work on couples' intentions has taken a similar approach using mothers' proxy reports (see Guzzo & Hayford, 2012; Korenman et al., 2002; Manlove et al., 2012). Moreover, Stykes' (2018) recent analyses indicate this is a viable strategy, as the majority of mothers' proxy reports of fathers' intentions (i.e., 75%), align with the father's own reports. The reliance on cross-sectional, retrospective data is also problematic for establishing causality; the experience of a marital dissolution may affect how women remember their feelings, or their perceptions of their husband's feelings, about the intendedness of birth. Finally, we focused only on first births and excluded women who had nonmarital births prior to marriage. Future work may consider how unintended childbearing and couple disagreement of higher-order births are linked with stability as well. It is possible that an unintended first birth is potentially more destabilizing than an unintended third birth.

Despite these limitations, findings raise important questions for future research and have implications for programs. Results suggest that when couples have a first birth and the mother

perceived that her husband did not want that birth (or at least not at that time), relationships experience challenges that increase the risk of marital instability. Although we used data uniquely suited to study unintended childbearing and instability, our research was unable to identify the particular relationship aspects – relationship quality, conflict, communication, parenting behaviors – through which unintended childbearing may affect the risk of dissolution. This remains an important avenue for future research. Certainly, our research suggests that a focus on nonmarital unintended childbearing or only on one spouse’s characterization of whether a birth was intended provides a limited understanding of unintended childbearing. This, in turn, suggests that many individuals and couples are likely not receiving social support from family and friends nor programmatic and policy support. In terms of programs and policy, our analyses suggest that consideration of both parents’ childbearing intentions could help practitioners identify potential challenges that married parents face in relationships and promote healthier, happier marriages through therapy and communication skills.

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Table 1. Weighted Descriptive Characteristics by Couple-Level Indicator of First Birth Fertility Intentions

	Total		Both Intended		Only Mother Intended		Only Father Intended		Neither Intended	
	μ	% (σ)	μ	% (σ)	μ	% (σ)	μ	% (σ)	μ	% (σ)
<i>Fertility and Relationship Histories</i>										
Conception timing										
+6 months prior to marriage		2.6		1.1 ^d		3.0		2.9		9.2 ^a
1-6 months prior to marriage		17.3		9.3 ^{cd}		11.7		39.2 ^a		43.6 ^a
Within the first 6 months of marriage		19.4		17.5 ^c		18.8		27.3 ^a		24.0
First 7-12 months of marriage		12.9		12.6		20.0		13.2		10.9
After first year of marriage		47.8		59.5 ^{bcd}		46.5 ^{acd}		17.4 ^{ab}		12.3 ^{ab}
Premarital cohabitation with spouse		45.0		46.4		36.4		37.5		47.1
Prior union with different partner		14.9		13.5 ^d		10.6		17.4		21.7 ^a
Age at first birth	25.5	(0.1)	26.7 ^{bcd}	(0.1)	25.2 ^{acd}	(0.4)	22.1 ^{ab}	(0.3)	22.1 ^{ab}	(0.2)
Number of additional children	1.2	(0.0)	1.1 ^{cd}	(0.0)	1.1	(0.1)	1.4 ^a	(0.0)	1.4 ^a	(0.0)
Husband had prior children		7.9		6.9 ^c		8.4		13.7 ^a		8.7
<i>Sociodemographic Characteristics</i>										
Race-ethnicity										
White		66.2		69.1 ^c		74.0 ^c		47.7 ^{ab}		60.8
Black		5.0		4.5		4.3		8.3		5.8
Hispanic		20.0		17.5 ^c		12.2		35.5 ^a		25.4
Other		8.8		8.9		9.5		8.5		8.0
Wife's education										
BA/BS degree or higher		42.1		48.7 ^{cd}		42.3 ^c		19.6 ^{ab}		25.2 ^a
Some college, no BA/BS		25.1		23.3 ^d		25.9		26.3		32.4 ^a
High school degree/GED		22.1		18.5 ^{cd}		25.3		36.3 ^a		28.6 ^a
No degree		10.7		9.5		6.5 ^c		17.8 ^b		13.8
Mother's education										
BA/BS degree or higher		19.6		22.2 ^{cd}		18.8		10.8 ^a		12.8 ^a
Some college, no BA/BS		21.8		21.2		29.5		15.1		25.0
High school degree/GED		33.2		33.3		31.2		30.2		35.8
No degree		25.4		23.3 ^c		20.5 ^c		43.9 ^{abd}		26.4 ^c
Reared by married bio/adoptive parents		72.6		75.3 ^c		69.1		64.3 ^a		66.7
N	3,963		2,682	69.2	271	6.7	363	9.2	647	14.9

“a” denotes a significant difference from both parents intending the birth, “b” denotes a significant difference from only the mother intending the birth, “c” denotes a significant difference from only the father intending the birth, and “d” denotes a significant difference from neither parent intending the birth.

Table 2. Relative Risk Ratios (RRRs) from Multinomial Logistic Regression Predicting Couples' Birth Intentions among Women Having a Marital First Birth (N = 3,963)

	Model 1 (Both Intended)			Model 2 (Both Intended)		
	Only Mother Intended	Only Father Intended	Neither Intended	Only Mother Intended	Only Father Intended	Neither Intended
<i>Fertility and Relationship Histories</i>						
Conception timing (omitted = After first year of marriage)						
+6 months prior to marriage	3.15*	3.82*	17.70***	3.16*	3.40	19.30***
1-6 months prior to marriage	1.28	6.42***	10.22***	1.28	6.09***	9.27***
Within the first 6 months of marriage	1.17	2.86***	3.85***	1.28	2.63***	3.69***
First 7-12 months of marriage	1.80	2.26*	2.83**	1.93	2.19*	2.84**
Premarital cohabitation with spouse	0.67	0.57*	0.80	0.61*	0.60*	0.86
Prior union with different partner	0.84	1.66	1.85*	0.81	1.92*	1.94*
Age at first birth	0.95	0.84***	0.87***	0.94	0.84***	0.83***
Number of additional children	0.79*	0.92	0.83	0.82	0.93	0.86
Husband had prior children	1.24	2.29**	1.20	1.26	2.18**	1.22
<i>Sociodemographic Characteristics</i>						
Race-ethnicity (omitted = White)						
Black				0.72	2.14*	1.32
Hispanic				0.59	1.51	1.33
Other				1.02	1.75	1.41
Wife's education (omitted = BA/BS degree or higher)						
Some college, no BA/BS				0.96	0.90	0.77
High school degree/GED				1.06	1.04	0.53*
No degree				0.62	0.57	0.35**
Mother's education (omitted = HS degree/GED)						
BA/BA degree or higher				0.99	0.74	0.85
Some college, no BA/BS				1.69	0.89	1.44
No degree				0.96	1.31	0.81
Reared by married bio/adoptive parents				0.70	0.81	0.95
Constant	0.34	3.04	1.29	0.53	3.33	4.39*
Log-Likelihood		-3,248.17			-3,204.72	

Note. * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001. All analyses controlled for five-year birth cohorts since the 2006-2015 NSFG data were appended.

Table 3. Odds Ratios (ORs) from Logistic Regression Event History Models Predicting the Odds of Marital Dissolution Following a Marital First Birth

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Couples' intentions (omitted = both intended)</i>			
Only mother intended	1.37**	1.31*	1.33*
Only father intended	1.80***	1.24	1.22
Neither intended	1.68***	1.28**	1.30**
<i>Fertility and Relationship Histories</i>			
<i>Conception timing (omitted = After first year of marriage)</i>			
+6 months prior to marriage		1.20	1.19
1-6 months prior to marriage		1.01	1.00
Within the first 6 months of marriage		0.95	0.95
First 7-12 months of marriage		0.90	0.87
Premarital cohabitation with spouse		1.14	1.14
Prior union with different partner		1.40**	1.40***
Age at first birth		0.92***	0.93***
Number of additional children		0.95	0.95
Husband had prior children		1.32*	1.31*
<i>Sociodemographic Characteristics</i>			
<i>Race-ethnicity (omitted = White)</i>			
Black			1.25
Hispanic			1.11
Other			1.05
<i>Wife's education (omitted = BA/BS degree or higher)</i>			
Some college, no BA/BS			1.21*
High school degree/GED			1.12
No degree			1.05
<i>Mother's education (omitted = HS degree/GED)</i>			
BA/BS degree or higher			1.13
Some college, no BA/BS			0.90
No degree			1.01
Reared by married bio/adoptive parents			0.87†
Constant	0.00***	0.03***	0.03***
Months since first marital birth	0.96***	0.97***	0.97***
Log Likelihood	-6,350.47	-6,290.21	-6,278.41
N	351,890	351,890	351,890

Note. * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001. All analyses controlled for five-year birth cohorts since the 2006-2015 NSFG data were appended.

Figure 1. Proportion of Marriages Intact a Decade after a First Marital Birth, by Couples' Intentions

