Relationship breaker?

Unintended births and relationship stability

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Introduction

While fertility rates have continuously declined in Europe, unintended births have remained common. In Northern and Western Europe one fifth up to one third of all births are unintended (Backhausen et al., 2014; Enthoven et al., 2022; Régnier-Loilier, Leridon, & Cahen, 2007; Stern et al., 2015; Tydén et al., 2011). Unintended births are not necessarily unwanted births. Nevertheless, previous research has demonstrated that unintended births are associated with adverse outcomes in terms of mental and physical health of mother and child (Gipson, Koenig, & Hindin, 2008; Grussu, Quatraro, & Nasta, 2005; Hall, Benton, Copas, & Stephenson, 2017; Kost & Lindberg, 2015). In this study, we will focus on another outcome by theorizing and testing to what extent unintended births are related to relationship stability of the couple in the first five years after the child is born in the Netherlands. We argue this is a relevant outcome to study because if unintended births increase the likelihood of relationship dissolution, the parental behavior not only directly affects the life of the parents, but also life chances of the child (Amato, 2010; Mortelmans, 2020). The few previous studies, which were solely USA-based, suggest that unintended births are associated with relationship instability (Guzzo & Hayford, 2012, 2014; Lichter, Michelmore, Turner, & Sassler, 2016; Maddow-Zimet, Lindberg, Kost, & Lincoln, 2016; Manlove et al., 2012). This study contributes to the literature in three ways: theoretically, analytically, and by studying a new context.

First, we will improve theoretical insights by using the theories on the impact of children on separation and apply them to the situation of unintended and intended births. Doing so, we come to the mechanism predicting that unintended births go together with increased likelihood of relationship instability (i.e. they are a 'relationship breaker'). We will put our theoretical arguments for 'unintended births as a relationship breaker' to extra tests by applying them to differences in the unintended births and relationship stability association

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by first and higher order births and by mothers' socioeconomic status. The following research questions will be answered:

Research Question 1: *Are unintended births associated with relationship instability when the child is five years old?*

Research Question 2: *Does the association between birth intention and relationship instability differ between first births and higher-order births?*

Research Question 3: *Does the association between birth intention and relationship instability differ by socio-economic status?*

Second, we will increase our knowledge on the association between unintended births and relationship stability by implementing analytical improvements. Birth intention is obtained from women's own reports captured in the first three months of the pregnancy. Previous studies on the association between birth intention and relationship stability have sometimes inferred birth intention from the order of partnership formation in relation to the start of the pregnancy. Pregnancies that precede relationship formation are regarded as (mostly) unintended births, while pregnancies that follow relationship formation are regarded as (mostly) intended births (Furstenberg Jr, 1976; Musick & Michelmore, 2015). This approach is too crude since pregnancies that happen outside of marriage or cohabitation can be intended, while pregnancies that happen within a relationship can be unintended. Other studies examining the association between birth intention and relationship stability have captured intention after the child was born (Guzzo & Hayford, 2012, 2014; Lichter et al., 2016; Maddow-Zimet et al., 2016; Manlove et al., 2012). This retrospective approach may lead to an underestimation of unintended births because people tend to rationalize their behaviour after an event and are reluctant to admit that a pregnancy was unintended once the child is born (Guzzo & Hayford, 2014). The measure used in the current study does not suffer from these selection issues and is therefore closer to the theoretical concept of unintended births than previous studies.

Third, we will study the association between unintended births and relationship stability in a different context than the United States, namely the Netherlands. The Dutch and American context differ in important ways. Compared to the USA, unintended pregnancies and teenage pregnancies are less common and abortion rates are lower in the Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2017; Enthoven et al., 2022; Finer & Henshaw, 2006; United Nations, 2011). This could influence the characteristics of the women who have an unintended birth. Moreover, the Dutch universal health-care system and its social welfare state regime may make it easier to adjust to an unintended birth and may reduce negative consequences. Overall, one could therefore expect that negative consequences of unintended births are less likely in the Netherlands. Should we nevertheless find that unintended births are related to increased relationship instability, there is a strong case for the relationship breaker pattern. If we appear to be unable to replicate the association between unintended births and increased relationship instability, we must conclude that contexts matter and that unintended births do not necessarily have to go together with higher dissolution risks and the related consequences for parents and children.

The current study uses data of the Generation R study, a panel study which followed women in Rotterdam and their child from pregnancy until the child's adulthood (Jaddoe et al., 2006). Using logistic regression models, we examine the association of unintended births on relationship stability until five years after the birth of the child.

Data and methods

Data

The research questions will be answered with data of the Generation R survey. Generation R is a population-based prospective cohort study in which children are followed from pregnancy to young adulthood (Jaddoe et al., 2006; Kooijman et al., 2016). All pregnant women with a delivery date between April 2002 and January 2006 and living in Rotterdam were invited for participation in the study. The response rate was 61%. The first wave included information of 9901 pregnancies. Of all women who participated 98% had a pregnancy that ended in a live birth and were eligible for postnatal follow-up interviewing. 69% of women who filled in the questionnaire during pregnancy also participated in the questionnaire when the child was five to six years old. Of these women, those who lived with a partner during the first interview (when the fetus was less than 18 weeks old) and with valid information on all variables were included. The analyses are based on a sample of 3813 women.

Variables

Relationship instability captures if mothers have experienced a separation in the 5-6 years after the first interview. The variable is created with the help of two questions. The first question is asked during the pregnancy: 'Do you currently have a partner?' (1. Yes, a partner with whom I live; 2. Yes, a partner with whom I do not live; 3. No, I do not have a partner; 4. Other). Only women who indicated that they had a partner with whom they lived were selected for analyses. The second question is asked when the child is five or six years old: 'Do you still have the same partner as during your Generation R pregnancy? (1. No, I have no partner at the moment; 2. No, I have a new partner; 3. Yes). Relationship instability is coded as 1 when women have no partner or have a new partner, and it is coded as 0 when women still have the same partner.

Intentionality of the birth. In the Generation R study, women were asked two questions to capture intendedness of the pregnancy when the fetus was less than 18 weeks old. 'Was this pregnancy planned?' (1. Yes; 2. No), and 'If no, an unplanned pregnancy can be experienced in different ways. How did you feel about it?' (1. I was pleased about the pregnancy virtually from the start; 2. I had mixed feelings initially, but am now pleased about it; 3. I still have mixed feelings; 4. I am mostly not happy about the pregnancy). For the moment, we have only used information of the first question. However, the analyses will be re-estimated with a variable which combines information of both question to examine if this influences the outcomes.

Higher-order birth reflects the birth-order of the pregnancy. The variable is based on the question 'With whom do you share your home?' which is asked during pregnancy. The variable is coded as 1 when women indicate that they live with own child(ren), and it is coded as 0 when they indicated they do not live with own child(ren). The analyses will be re-estimated with the use of the question 'How many living children have you given birth to?' whenever this data is made available to us by the Generation R study.

Socio-economic status Socio-economic status (SES) is based on mother's educational attainment during pregnancy. It differentiates between women with low SES (no education or primary education), medium SES (secondary education), and high SES (higher education).

Age during first interview is included as a control variable.

Preliminary results

Preliminary results suggest that women with an unintended birth are more likely to experience relationship instability during the first 5 years after the birth (Model 1). The association between unintended births and relationship instability does not differ between first and higher-order births (Model 2) and it also does not differ between socio-economic status (Model 3).

Table 1. Results of logistic regression models showing the association between the independent variables and relationship instability.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Unintended birth	0.53***	0.59***	0.31
Higher-order birth	-0.20	-0.16	-0.19
Educational level (Ref. Low)			
Medium	-0.04	-0.05	-0.10
High	-0.63**	-0.65**	-0.72**
Age	-0.03*	-0.03*	-0.03*
Unintended birth * Higher-order birth		-0.15	
Unintended birth * Medium education			0.18
Unintended birth * High education			0.32

*** $p<0,001$; ** $p<0,01$; * $p<0,05$

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