

The Effects of Unplanned Pregnancy Among College Women

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(ABSTRACT)

The majority of today's college students engage in sexual intercourse (Abler & Sedlacek, 1989), generally with multiple partners (Netting, 1980). Many of these sexually active students use contraception; many do not. Since students are engaging in intercourse and some are failing to use contraceptives properly or not using contraceptives at all, it is not surprising that 12% of college students report either experiencing or being involved in unplanned pregnancy (Elliot & Brantley, 1997). Wiley, James, Funey, and Jordan-Belver (1997) estimate that this number may be closer to 23% of college students. While both studies derived their different percentages from different college student populations, both percentages are significant. Little descriptive knowledge about the experience of unplanned pregnancy for college women exists.

The purpose of this study was to describe traditional aged (18-22 years old) women's perceptions of the effects of unplanned pregnancy while enrolled full-time in an institution of higher education. The study examined the effects of the pregnancy from conception through the pregnancy's outcome. It also examined long term or on-going effects that women experienced after the termination or miscarriage. The study did not investigate the effects women attributed to the pregnancy's outcome.

Ten traditional aged college women who had experienced an unplanned pregnancy while enrolled as a full-time student in a university in the mid-Atlantic region volunteered to participate in a one to two hour interview. The interview questions focused

on the effects they experienced as a result of the pregnancy. The women were recruited to the study through flyers and personal announcements I made to several large undergraduate classes and student organizations.

The sample of this study was ethnically diverse. Five of the ten women were ethnic minorities: three African American women, one Asian American woman, and one bi-racial Hispanic woman. The sample was similar in the outcome of the pregnancy. Nine women terminated the pregnancy; one woman miscarried.

There are several significant findings of the study. First, the women in this study did not become pregnant as a result of a casual sexual encounter. All of the women conceived within the context of a committed relationship. This runs counter to the stereotype that college women become pregnant as a result of careless, “one night stands.” Second, women reported a significant number of long term effects associated with the pregnancy. Long term effects are those that last a year or more. The most prevalent of these effects are feelings of guilt and fear of being stigmatized for their experience. These women are haunted by feelings of guilt. The guilt makes it difficult for them to associate with peers and family because the subject of pregnancy and abortion are discussed frequently.

The women who participated in this study fear being socially marked or stigmatized because of the pregnancy. They fear they will be judged negatively by their peers and family because they experienced pregnancy and abortion. The guilt, shame, fear, and sense of stigma the participants reported are not just individual attributes but a reflection of wider social views about women’s responsibility for sexuality and reproduction. Most women in this study did not tell their families of their experience. The

majority of the women revealed their situation to their partner and only one or two friends. Keeping the situation a secret heightened the sense of isolation and depression experienced by the women.

The issue of unplanned pregnancy among college women is rarely discussed. The women who experienced this did not feel safe enough on campus to come forward to seek help. They suffered personal anguish and often negative academic impacts. Universities need to create safe environments for these women to disclose their experience. Educational programs and support groups run by counseling centers or women's centers would be a step toward a safer environment for these women. Families and friends of women who experience an unplanned pregnancy can assist their loved one by expressing emotional support and being cautious about the judgmental things they say about pregnancy and abortion.

Despite being conceived within a committed relationship, participants clearly saw the pregnancy as something that was their responsibility. Findings suggest that some women experience a developmental process in their response to the unplanned pregnancy, moving from a position of irresponsibility to a position of responsibility. Future research may examine the stages of this process and how it compares to existing developmental theory.

Dedication

This project is dedicated to two women who have changed my life,

Tisha and Dayna.

To Tisha, for exhibiting the most courage I have ever seen demonstrated. You are a constant source of inspiration for me. To Dayna, for speaking the truth. Thank you for showing me the way to personal and spiritual honesty. I am forever indebted to your generosity of love and support.

This project is also dedicated to the ten women who shared their stories with me.

They are strong young women. I am grateful for their courage.

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