

Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health
Volume 40, Number 3, September 2008

Pleasure, Prophylaxis and Procreation: A Qualitative Analysis of Intermittent Contraceptive Use And Unintended Pregnancy

By Jenny A. Higgins, Jennifer S. Hirsch, James Trussell

CONTEXT: Although pregnancy ambivalence is consistently associated with poorer contraceptive use, little is known about the sexual, social and emotional dynamics at work in pregnancy ambivalence.

METHODS: During in-depth sexual and reproductive history interviews conducted in 2003, 36 women and men were asked about the relational and emotional circumstances surrounding each pregnancy, as well as their thoughts about conceiving a baby with both current and previous partners. An ethnographic, inductive approach was used to analyze the data.

RESULTS: Half of respondents had experienced at least one unintended pregnancy. Respondents described three categories of pleasure related to pregnancy ambivalence: active eroticization of risk, in which pregnancy fantasies heightened the charge of the sexual encounter; passive romanticization of pregnancy, in which people neither actively sought nor prevented conception; and an escapist pleasure in imagining that a pregnancy would sweep one away from hardship. All three categories were associated with misuse or nonuse of coitus-dependent methods.

CONCLUSIONS: For some individuals, the perceived emotional and sexual benefits of conception may outweigh the goal of averting conception, even when a child is not wholly intended. Future behavioral studies should collect more nuanced data on pregnancy-related pleasures. Clinicians and patients would benefit from clearer guidelines for assessing ambivalence and for linking ambivalent clients with longer-acting methods that are not coitus-dependent.

Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, 2008, 40(3):130–137

- » [table of contents](#)
- » [search the PSRH archive](#)
- » [guidelines for authors](#)

Jenny A. Higgins is postdoctoral research associate at the Office of Population Research and the Center for Health and Wellbeing, Princeton University. Jennifer S. Hirsch is associate professor, Department of Sociomedical Sciences, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University. James Trussell is director of the Office of Population Research, Princeton University, and visiting professor at the Hull-York Medical School, University of Hull, England.

DOI:10.1363/4013008

[Full text in PDF](#)

[Full-featured version available to subscribers](#)



