

Extended Abstract

**Born Unwanted: 35 Years Later
Observations from the Prague Study**

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This paper provides an overview of the longitudinal study of 220 individuals (110 males and 110 females) born in 1961-1963 in Prague, (then Czechoslovakia), to women *twice* denied abortion for the same pregnancy (once on initial request and again on appeal) and 220 pair-matched controls. The unique circumstances that made the Prague Study possible, the sample selection process, and the pair-matching procedure are described. Study participants were medically, psychologically, and sociologically assessed in five follow-up waves conducted at ages 9, 14-16, and 21-23, 30, and 35 years. To control for potential confounding effects, the follow-up waves at ages 30 and 35 years included the siblings of all the study participants except the "only" children, that is, those without siblings.

The Setting

The Government of Czechoslovakia liberalized its abortion statute in December 1957, providing termination of pregnancy on medical and "other" grounds during the first three months of gestation. Approval of a woman's request was the responsibility of the District Abortion Commission. If the request was denied, the woman could appeal to the Regional Appellate Abortion Commission. Appealing a denial and making a second request to terminate the same pregnancy constituted empirical confirmation that the pregnancy was strongly "unwanted," at least in its early stages.

The Sample

Fortuitous circumstances made it possible to gain access in 1970 to the 1961-1963 records of the Prague Appellate Abortion Commission. Of the 24,889 applications for abortion, 638 (2 percent) were rejected on initial request and again on subsequent appeal. After excluding 83 women who were not Prague residents or were citizens of another country, there remained 555 women whose request for termination of an unwanted pregnancy had been twice denied. Of these, 31 women had moved out of Prague; 9 had given false addresses on their abortion applications; 6 were found not to have been pregnant; and 8 were untraceable for other reasons. Of the 501 women for whom information was available, 316 (63 percent) had carried their pregnancies to term while resident in Prague. Of the remaining 185 women (37 percent), 43 had obtained legal abortions after requesting termination from another district abortion commission; 80 were alleged to have aborted spontaneously (a percentage twice that normally expected); and 62 had no record of having given birth.

The 316 traceable Prague women gave birth to 317 live children. Of these, 6 died (5 during the first year) and 19 were adopted, a proportion exceeding the national average by more than 30 times. An additional 39 children had moved with their parents from Prague and 2 were placed in institutional care. Four mothers denied ever having had a child, although hospital records showed that they had delivered

one. Three women had died, and the children of 3 others were living with relatives in rural areas. Only 7 mothers refused to cooperate with the research project.

The remaining 233 women and their children were located in Prague when the research study was initiated. However, 13 of the children could not be successfully pair-matched, thus reducing the sample to 220 children, 110 boys and 110 girls. The 185 women who were still living in Prague and had managed to avoid giving birth, were not included in the study. They represent perhaps an even greater degree of pregnancy unwantedness than those women who carried to term after two requests for abortion had been denied.

The Controls

Each unwanted pregnancy (UP) child was pair-matched at age 9 with an accepted pregnancy (AP) control child whose mother's name was not found on the abortion request registers. Pair matching of children was for age, gender, birth order, number of siblings, and school. Mothers were matched for age, socioeconomic status (as determined by their and their partners' educational level), and by the partner's presence in the home (that is, completeness of the family). All the children were reared in two-parent homes, although sometimes with a father substitute in lieu of the biological father. To include as many of the UP children in the study as possible, it was necessary to match some of the three-child UP families (where one or two additional children were born after the UP child) with two-child AP families. There were 50 "only" children (no siblings) in the UP sample and among the AP controls.

Hypotheses and Findings

After a brief discussion of the theoretical assumptions underlying the study, findings from each follow-up wave will be presented. Review of early childhood records showed that the UP and AP children had started life under similar conditions. There were no statistically significant differences in birth weight or length, in the incidence of congenital malformation, or in signs of minimal brain dysfunction. However, the UP children were breast-fed for a significantly shorter time or not at all. They also tended to be slightly but consistently overweight. At age 9, both groups obtained similar mean scores on the WISC - 102 for the UP children and 103 for the AP controls. However, the UP children received lower school grades in the Czech language and were rated less favorably on school performance, diligence, and behavior by their teachers and mothers. On sociometric scales, the UP children were significantly more often rejected as a friend by their school mates than were the AP controls.

Some Observations

The first three follow-up waves of the Prague Study (to be presented in more detail) showed that although differences between UP study participants and AP controls matched on sociodemographic variables were not dramatic and changed over time, the differences in psychosocial development were consistently in disfavor of the UP subjects, especially for those who were only children. The UP subjects were not so much over represented on extremely negative indicators as they were under represented on any indicator of excellence.

Further support for the hypothesis, positing negative effects on children born of unwanted

pregnancies, was found in the fourth and fifth follow-up waves which included siblings and controlled more rigorously for confounding effects. In both data sets UP subjects reported that they had been or were psychiatric patients (especially hospitalized patients) more frequently than their siblings or the AP controls. The use of siblings as controls was a very conservative test of the risk factor hypothesis because the occurrence of an unwanted pregnancy and the birth of a child from such a pregnancy probably had a significant influence on the mental health of the parents and the family environment, making the siblings less than ideal controls.

The Prague Study was conducted under specific sociopolitical circumstances unlikely to be easily replicable. Although different cultural conditions and contexts might lead to different findings in other countries, the Prague Study lends support to the hypothesis that being born from an unwanted pregnancy entails an increased risk for negative psychosocial development and mental well-being. Although our observations are open to discussion, the implications of the Prague Study for social and developmental psychology in general, and for mental health and public health policy and responsible parenthood in particular deserve attention.

NOTES

1. Overheads will be prepared to show details.
2. Credit will be given to funding organizations and colleagues.
3. References will be cited in the paper.

