Using Panel Data to Examine Pregnancy Attitudes over Time

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Abstract

Objectives

To determine whether and how women's attempts to get pregnant and their desire to avoid pregnancy change over six months' time as well as which characteristics and circumstances are associated with these changes.

Method

We use two panels of data from a sample of approximately 3,000 U.S. adult women gathered six months apart.

Results

Only 4% of women were trying to get pregnant at both time points, but six percent went from trying to not or vice versa. Two-thirds reported a strong desire to avoid pregnancy at both points, but 9% transitioned from strong to not strong and an additional 7% transitioned from not strong to strong. Women who transitioned to a more serious romantic relationship were at increased risk of transitioning to trying to become pregnant and, not surprisingly, to a weaker pregnancy avoidance. Interestingly, some of the variables we tested, including changes in employment status and race/ethnicity, were associated with one but not the other outcome variable.

Conclusions

The results highlight the importance of taking a holistic perspective of women's lives when studying pregnancy intentions and in reproductive health care services such as contraceptive counseling. Context matters and it may change rapidly.

Key words: Fertility intentions, pregnancy avoidance, pregnancy planning, panel data

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Introduction

About half of pregnancies in the United States are unintended [1]. This figure has remained relatively stable for two decades and, in turn, reducing the rate of unintended pregnancy by 10% is one goal of Healthy People 2020 [2]. At any given point in time, around 5% of non-sterilized U.S. women report that they are trying to get pregnant [3, 4]. Data from a national sample of approximately 4,000 women aged 25-45 found that women who were trying to become pregnant were more likely to be married and non-White and less likely to have children compared to women who were not trying [4]. Apart from this one study there is little research examining which groups of women report that they are actively trying to become pregnant or which life events are associated with transitions to trying.

Additionally, research has shown that substantial minorities of women who are not actively trying to become pregnant are also not actively trying to avoid it. One national study of women aged 18-44 found that 58% of women at risk of unintended pregnancy (i.e. not trying to become pregnant) reported that it was very important to avoid pregnancy, but one in five reported that it was only a little or not at all important to do so [7]. Similarly, McQuillan's [4] national study found that 71% of women were not trying to become pregnant, but 23% were "okay either way." These attitudes can influence pregnancy avoidance efforts. For example, women who place little or no importance on avoiding pregnancy use less effective methods [7] and use methods inconsistently [7, 8]. Although many studies have noted that the dichotomous trying vs. not trying does not describe the variety of pregnancy intentions women have [e.g. 4–6], there is little research examining which groups of women are less interested in avoiding pregnancy, whether and how these attitudes change over time and for which groups they do so.

This study will be the first to prospectively examine changes in fertility intentions and pregnancy avoidance attitudes among a national sample of U.S. women. While our study period is limited to the

relatively short time period of six months, we find that these outcomes change for a small, but non-negotiable, proportion of women. Additionally, we find that changes in life circumstances such as union status and employment are associated with stability and change in fertility intentions and pregnancy avoidance attitudes but that demographic characteristics also play an important role in understanding these outcomes.

Data

Data for this analysis come from Waves 1 and 2 of Continuity and Change in Contraceptive Use (CCCU) Study. The CCCU was administered online to a national sample of women aged 18–39. GfK, an online survey firm, administered the survey using their KnowledgePanel, a national household panel recruited using a probability-based methodology.

In order to best capture women at risk of pregnancy, our baseline survey population was restricted to women aged 18–39 who had ever had vaginal sex with a man, who were not currently pregnant, who had not had a tubal ligation, and whose main male sexual partner had not had a vasectomy. In late 2012, 11,365 women between the ages of 18–39 were invited to participate in the survey. Of those, 6,658 answered the four screening items, yielding a response rate of 59%; 4,647 of those were eligible to participate, and 4,643 completed the full survey. Nine respondents were excluded from the final dataset because they were deemed ineligible. A subsequent survey was conducted with the same women six months later, and 69% of the original respondents participated. Analysis for this study is restricted to the 3,041 women who participated in both waves and were not pregnant at Wave 2.

Women who did not take part in the follow-up survey were younger (average age 28 rather than 29 among those who did not drop out), less educated (32% had a college degree compared to 46%), were less often White (57% vs 66%) or had no prior births (44% vs. 52%).

We examine two outcome measures: whether women were trying to get pregnant and how much they wanted to avoid pregnancy. All women were asked: **"***Which of the following best describes your current plans regarding having a(nother) baby?"* Response categories included "I am trying to get pregnant now," "I am not trying to get pregnant now but expect to try in the future," "I don't want to have any (more) children" and "I'm not sure if I want to have a(nother) baby." We were particularly interested in understanding women who were trying, or transitioned to trying, to get pregnant. Respondents were classified according to "never tried," and the opposite cases as "constantly trying." Women who first reported trying, but were not trying at follow up were classified as "stopped trying" and the opposite cases as "started trying."

Respondents were also asked about their pregnancy attitudes: *"How important is it to you to AVOID becoming pregnant now?"* and provided with a 6-point scale where 1 indicated "not at all important" and 6 "very important." We transformed this into a binary variable, where values 4-6 indicated strong and 1-3 a weaker desire to avoid pregnancies. We then classified respondents based on whether they experienced a change in avoidance between the waves. Women reporting values 4-6 at both waves were classified as having a "consistently strong" pregnancy avoidance, women reporting values 1-3 as "never strong," women reporting values 4-6 at first wave but 1-3 at second were classified as "became weaker," and the opposite as "became stronger." Preliminary analyses explored several coding schemes and resulted in largely the same findings.

Our main explanatory variables included changes in union and employment status[3]. Union status includes the following categories: married, cohabiting, dating, and single. We also created a "change in union status" variable: no change; stronger union (for those who got married, or started cohabiting or

[3] In preliminary analysis (changes in) health insurance status and exposure to disruptive events were included, but since neither of the variables was associated with either of the outcomes, the results are not presented here.

dating); and union dissolution (including divorce, dissolution of cohabiting union and transitioning from dating to single).

Employment status has three categories: not employed, employed part-time (less than 35 hours per week) and employed full-time (at least 35 hours per week) depending on how many hours women spent in employment the week prior to the interview. Change in employment status was described using categories “more work” (transitioning from no job to part- or full-time; or from part-time to full-time) and “less work” (transitioning from a part- or full-time job into unemployment; or from full-time to part-time). The survey did not assess whether women who were not employed had been laid off, were on leave, or were not working by choice.

Our analyses also include the baseline characteristics of age (grouped in 18-24, 25-29, 30-34, and 35-39), race/ethnicity (White, Black, Hispanic, other), level of education (less than high school, high school, some college, college degree), parity (based on number of live births: 0, 1, 2 and 3 or more), and the age of the youngest child in the household (whether the child is an infant (0-12 months old), toddler (1-3 years old), kid (4-12 years old) or teen (13-19 years old)).

Methods

We analyzed the data using descriptive statistics and multinomial regression. We first examined the distribution of the outcome variables. We then tabulated change in the time-varying independent variables over the six-month time period and baseline characteristics for time invariant variables. Both time-varying and baseline independent variables were tabulated against the two outcome variables.

Finally, multinomial regression analyses with trying (never trying [base outcome], consistently trying, started trying, stopped trying); and pregnancy avoidance (consistently strong [base outcome], never strong, became weaker, became stronger) as the outcome variables, were conducted. All the time-

varying covariates and the baseline characteristics were included in the models initially. Any variables that were not significant at 10% level were excluded from the final models. The significance of dummy-variables was tested using joint Wald-tests examining the hypothesis that all of the categories have no association with the outcome. The results of the multinomial regression analyses were illustrated by calculating fitted probabilities of having experienced a change in pregnancy intentions or attitudes using average marginal effects at representative values [9].

All analyses excluded the 166 women who became pregnant between baseline and follow up because they were not asked about their short term pregnancy intentions and attitudes at Wave 2. The majority of those who got pregnant, 60%, were not trying to become pregnant at baseline, and 33% reported strong pregnancy avoidance (results not shown).

Results

More than nine out of ten women reported that they were not trying to get pregnant at both surveys, but there was a small increase in the proportion trying at wave 2 (Table 1). Similarly, three-quarters of women reported a strong pregnancy avoidance attitude at both surveys, though this proportion decreased slightly. Most women were consistent in intentions and avoidance attitudes, though 17-18% reported that they were not trying to get pregnant but not strongly motivated to avoid pregnancy either (data not shown).

[Table 1 here]

Eighteen percent of women experienced a change in relationship status (Table 2). The majority, who were married at baseline, were still married at follow-up, but there was some change for women in other types of relationships. While one in five women were cohabiting at each time point, 16% were doing so at both time points. Similar patterns were observed among dating women.

[Table 2 here]

A third of the sample was not employed at either point, 21%-24% were employed part-time and more than four in ten were employed full-time. Many of the women in our sample had fluctuating employment schedules: a quarter experienced a change in employment levels over the six month period (Table 2).

Sixty percent of the sample was younger than age 30. More than half had no children. The youngest child living in the household was most often a toddler (19%) or an infant (14%). The majority of the sample were white (65%) and almost a half had a college degree (Table 2).

Table 3 shows that 4% of women decided to start trying to get pregnant and 2% stopped trying between baseline and follow-up studies. All explanatory variables were associated with this outcome at 5% significance level.

[Table 3 here]

Not surprisingly, being in a romantic relationship that moved to "the next stage" was associated with starting to try to get pregnant more often (5% of women) than union dissolution (3%). Changes in hours worked were not associated with changes in trying, but consistently working part-time was associated with starting to try (5%) and stopping trying (3%) more often than among other groups.

Five to six percent of women who were aged 25-29, had high school education, had one child, had infants or toddlers in their household, or were Black, started trying to get pregnant between the waves compared to 2-4% of women in the other categories of age, education, parity, age of children and race/ethnicity.

Table 4 shows that 9% of women transitioned from strong to not strong avoidance and 7% from not strong to strong. All explanatory variables were associated with this outcome at 0.1% significance level except race/ethnicity (p=0.759).

[Table 4 here]

Women who got married or started dating or cohabiting transitioned to weaker pregnancy avoidance more often (12%) than women who experienced a union dissolution (7%). Interestingly, employment status was quite differently associated with pregnancy avoidance than trying. For instance, women working part-time were most likely to transition in either direction when it came to trying to become pregnant, but the same group of women was the least likely to report a change in pregnancy avoidance.

Women in their late 20s and early 30s experienced changes in pregnancy avoidance more often than the other age groups. Women with high school diploma or less more often reported shifting to a weaker avoidance than other women (12-13% vs. 8-10%). Parous women shifted more often to weaker avoidance than childless women (8 vs. 11%, respectively), but age of children mattered too, since mothers of infants were more likely to transition into either direction of pregnancy avoidance than women with older children.

Findings using the multivariate analyses were similar to the bivariate analyses although fewer differences were statistically significant. Change in employment status was excluded from the model estimating the likelihood of experiencing changes in trying to get pregnant, whereas race/ethnicity was excluded from the pregnancy avoidance model. All the covariates presented in Figures 1 and 2 were statistically significant in the overall multinomial regression models.

Figure 1 shows the fitted probabilities of transitioning to trying to get pregnant and transitioning from trying to not trying based on the multivariate model. Controlling for respondent's age, education,

race/ethnicity, age and number of children, these probabilities suggest that moving into a stronger union or not changing one's union status (which most often was true for married women) was associated with transitioning to trying to get pregnant more often than stopping trying (4-5% probability compared to 1-2% probability, respectively).

[Figure 1 here]

Women in their late 20s were more likely to start than stop trying (5% vs. 2%). Those who had a college degree more often started than stopped trying (4% vs. 1% probability, respectively), but there were no large differences among other educational groups (Figure 1). Both low (no children) and high (three or more children) parities were associated with a higher probability to start trying, but like in the bivariate models, age of children mattered too. Mothers of infants and toddlers were relatively likely to start trying to get pregnant (5-6% probability), but mothers of teenagers rarely did so (2% probability). Hispanic and White women were less likely to stop trying and more likely to start than other racial or ethnic groups.

Figure 2 shows the fitted probabilities of experiencing a change in pregnancy avoidance based on the multinomial logistic model. Moving to the "next stage" in one's union was associated with 14% chance in transitioning into a weaker pregnancy avoidance, compared to five percent probability of transitioning into stronger avoidance. The pattern of change was similar to the model where transitions in trying to get pregnant were studied.

[Figure 2 here]

Many of the baseline characteristics were associated with changes in pregnancy avoidance (Figure 2). Women in their late 20s and early 30s had a higher probability of transitioning into a weaker avoidance than women who were younger or older than them (11% vs. 7%). Women, who had less than high

school education, had a relatively high probability of transitioning into a weaker avoidance (14%), but also women with a college degree were more likely to transition into a weaker than into a stronger avoidance (9% vs 5%, respectively). Women in most parity groups were equally likely to transition into either direction, but women with at least two children had a higher probability of transitioning into a weaker than stronger avoidance. Interestingly, this pattern was quite different from the model where shifts in trying to get pregnant were studied. Women whose youngest child was an infant had a markedly higher probability of transitioning into a weaker pregnancy avoidance attitude (15%) compared to women whose children were older (6-9%).

Employment status was less clearly associated with pregnancy avoidance than many of the baseline characteristics. Constantly working full-time was more often associated with transitioning into a weaker avoidance than into a stronger one, but other employment status categories were roughly equally likely to transition into either direction (Figure 2).

Discussion

Our results show that fertility intentions—examined here as both an overt and immediate effort to get pregnant and the strength of one's desire to avoid pregnancy—change for a non-negotiable minority of women over a relatively short (six month) period of time. Perhaps not surprisingly, attitudes towards pregnancy avoidance showed more movement than efforts to get pregnant. Pregnancy avoidance has a behavioral element, insofar as many women who have a strong desire to avoid pregnancy are likely to engage in practices to prevent this from happening, but it is less exclusive than reporting actively trying to get pregnant.

Overall, our study shows that a number of characteristics were associated with change and stability in the desire to both get pregnant and avoid pregnancy. Women who got married or started cohabiting or dating transitioned into a weaker pregnancy avoidance more often than other women, and were also

more likely to transition to trying to get pregnant. The opposite associations were true for women who experienced a union dissolution. While strong pregnancy avoidance was the norm for all women, including those who experienced a change in relationship status, that we were able to capture associations over a relatively short time period suggests that relationship status is an important predictor of these outcomes.

Changes in hours worked over a six-month period were not necessarily followed by changes in pregnancy avoidance and were not at all associated with changes in trying to get pregnant in the multivariate analysis. Given that socioeconomic position has often been associated with fertility intentions [e.g. 10–12], it is quite interesting that changes in hours worked did not have a clear association with pregnancy attitudes. It may be that women interpret such changes as favorable or unfavorable depending on their other life circumstances.

Women in the lowest level of education were relatively likely to transition to weaker pregnancy avoidance, but less often into trying to get pregnant, whereas women with at least college degree reported both higher likelihood of transitioning into weaker avoidance and starting trying. This may reflect different strategies of planning childbearing among those at different levels of education.

Young women (age 18-24) were less likely to transition in any direction in their pregnancy intentions and attitudes compared to older women. These patterns might reflect the fact that younger women are more often pursuing education, stable employment and relationships and, in turn, motivated to postpone childbearing. By contrast, women in their late 20s more often than other women transitioned into a weaker pregnancy avoidance and started trying to get pregnant, which may suggest that this is seen as a preferred period of life to have children.

Age of children living in the household was an important covariant too. Women who had young child(ren) (infant or toddler) more often reported shifting to weaker pregnancy avoidance and

transitioning into trying to get pregnant. These women may wish to have their children relatively closely spaced.

These results highlight the importance of taking a holistic perspective of women's lives when studying pregnancy attitudes. Context matters, and it may change within a short period of time. The relevant context is not limited to any one variable, but is rather complicated. Since we know from previous studies that pregnancy attitudes are associated with consistency in contraceptive use [7, 8], and if the goals of Healthy People 2020 in reducing unintended pregnancy are to be met [2], this should be taken into account when contraceptive counseling is given. As pregnancy attitudes and intentions may change rapidly, women should know how to adjust their contraceptive use accordingly. This result also has a methodological implication: cross-sectional studies may not capture the entire story of pregnancy intentions and attitudes, as these studies assume that these measures are fairly stable over time.

There were limitations in this study. Women who were lost to attrition between waves were younger and less educated than women who stayed. However, if we observe this much change even among our sample of women who may lead more stable lives than younger and less educated women, there is no reason to expect that the associations would be weaker in a less biased sample. Moreover, we lacked information of partner's employment status and other potentially important characteristics which may affect pregnancy intentions [e.g. 13]. In addition, a larger sample size would have permitted a more detailed examination between different types of transitions in pregnancy intentions and attitudes as well as union and employment status. Future studies of pregnancy intentions should collect information of the partner's characteristics. The strengths on the study include the innovative study design exploring rarely studied associations between changes in women's lives and fertility intentions. Moreover, there are very few existing longitudinal studies at the national level measuring adult women's fertility intentions prospectively.

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Table 1
Distribution of the outcome variables, %

	Baseline	Wave 2
Trying	6.4	8.3
Not trying	93.6	91.8
Total	100.0	100.0
N	*3019*	*3018*
Weak avoidance	23.1	25.6
Strong avoidance	77.0	74.4
Total	100.0	100.0
N	*3024*	*3024*

Table 2 Socio-demographic characteristics at baseline (and Wave 2 for time varying covariates), %

		Baseline	Wave 2	Both waves	N (baseline)
Union status	Married	45	46	44	1,378
	Cohabiting	20	20	16	621
	Dating	21	20	14	653
	Single	13	14	9	389
	Total	100	100	82	3,041
Employment	Not employed	35	34	28	1,030
	Less than full time	24	21	13	729
	Full time	41	45	35	1,218
	Total	100	100	76	2977
Age	18-24	27			807
	25-29	34			1,036
	30-34	21			640
	35-39	18			558
	Total	100			3,041
Parity	0	53			1,609
	1	20			592
	2	18			532
	3 or more	10			299
	Total	100			3,032
Youngest child in household	No children in hh	51			1,562
	Infant (0-12 months)	14			430
	Toddler (1-3 yrs)	19			574
	Kid (4-12 yrs)	12			355
	Teen (13-19 yrs)	4			120
	Total	100			3,041
Race/ethnicity	White	65			1,978
	Black	9			273
	Hispanic	8			254
	Other	18			536
	Total	100			3,041
Education	Less than high school	5			145
	High school	14			412
	Some college	36			1,105
	BA or higher	45			1,379
	Total	100			3,041

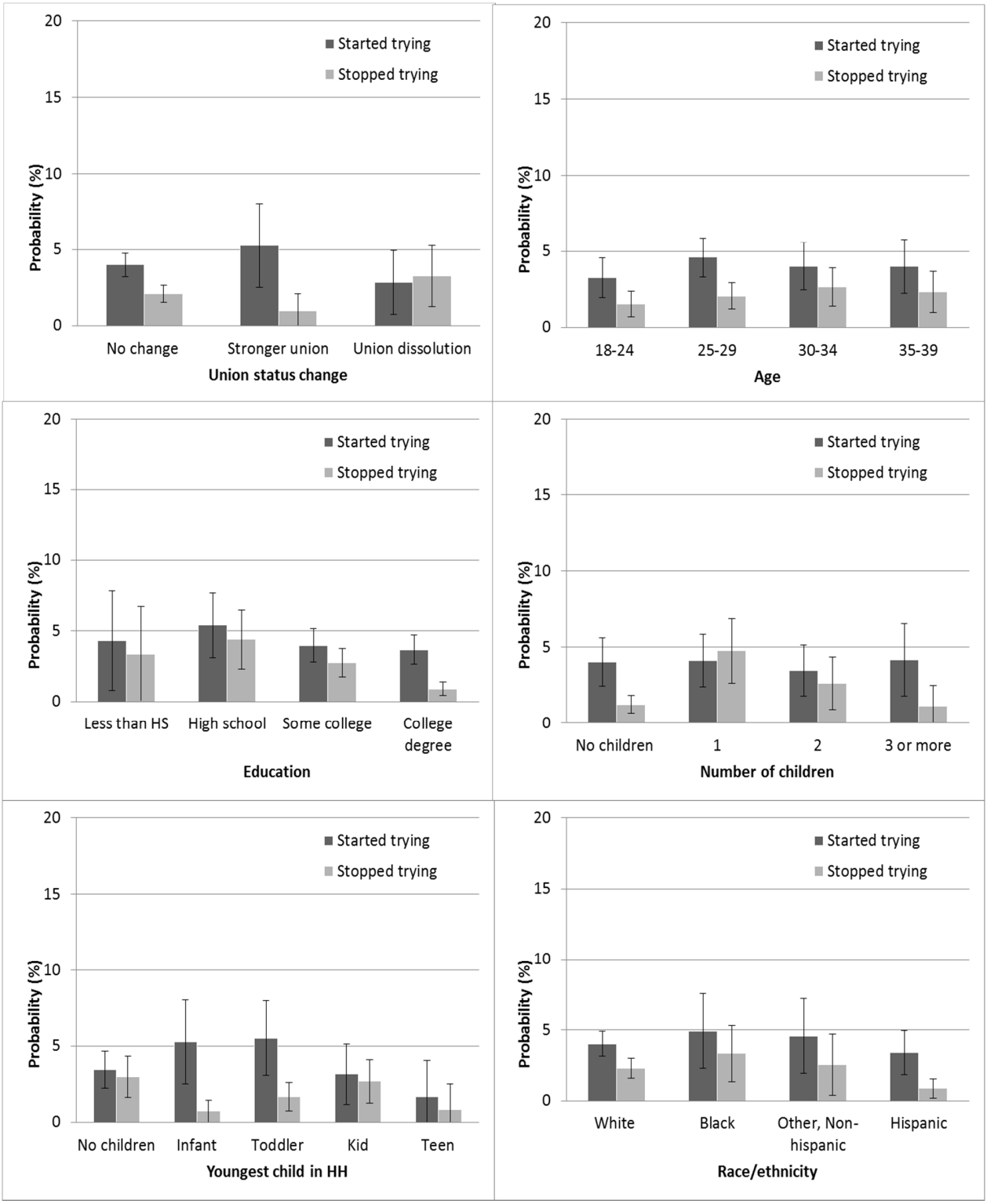
Table 3 The bivariate associations between the explanatory variables and trying (%)

Trying to become pregnant	Never trying	Consistently trying	Started trying	Stopped trying	Total	N
TOTAL	90	4	4	2	100	3000
UNION STATUS					p=0.001	
No change	89	5	4	2	100	2,466
Stronger union	93	1	5	1	100	280
Union dissolution	91	2	3	4	100	254
EMPLOYMENT					p=0.044	
Full time	91	4	3	2	100	348
Part time	87	5	5	3	100	775
Not working	94	2	2	2	100	380
Less work	89	5	4	2	100	1,005
More work	91	4	4	1	100	481
AGE AT BASELINE					p=0.010	
18-24	93	2	3	2	100	802
25-29	89	4	5	2	100	1,021
30-34	87	6	4	3	100	630
35-39	89	5	4	2	100	547
EDUCATION AT BASELINE					p=0.004	
Less than high school	87	6	4	3	100	143
High school	85	5	5	4	100	401
Some college	90	4	4	3	100	1,090
College degree	91	4	4	1	100	1,366
PARITY (Wave II)					p<0.001	
0	90	5	3	1	100	1,593
1	85	6	5	4	100	581
2	91	2	4	2	100	526
3 or more	92	2	5	1	100	300
YOUNGEST CHILD IN HH					p=0.001	
No children in hh	90	5	4	2	100	1,540
Infant (0-12 months)	92	2	5	1	100	425
Toddler (1-3 yrs)	86	6	6	2	100	569
Kid (4-12 yrs)	89	3	3	4	100	348
Teen (13-19 yrs)	94	3	2	1	100	118
RACE/ETHNICITY					p=0.029	
White	90	4	4	2	100	1,953
Black	88	3	5	4	100	267
Other, Non-Hispanic	91	3	4	2	100	252
Hispanic	89	7	4	1	100	528

Table 4 The bivariate associations between the explanatory variables and pregnancy avoidance (%)

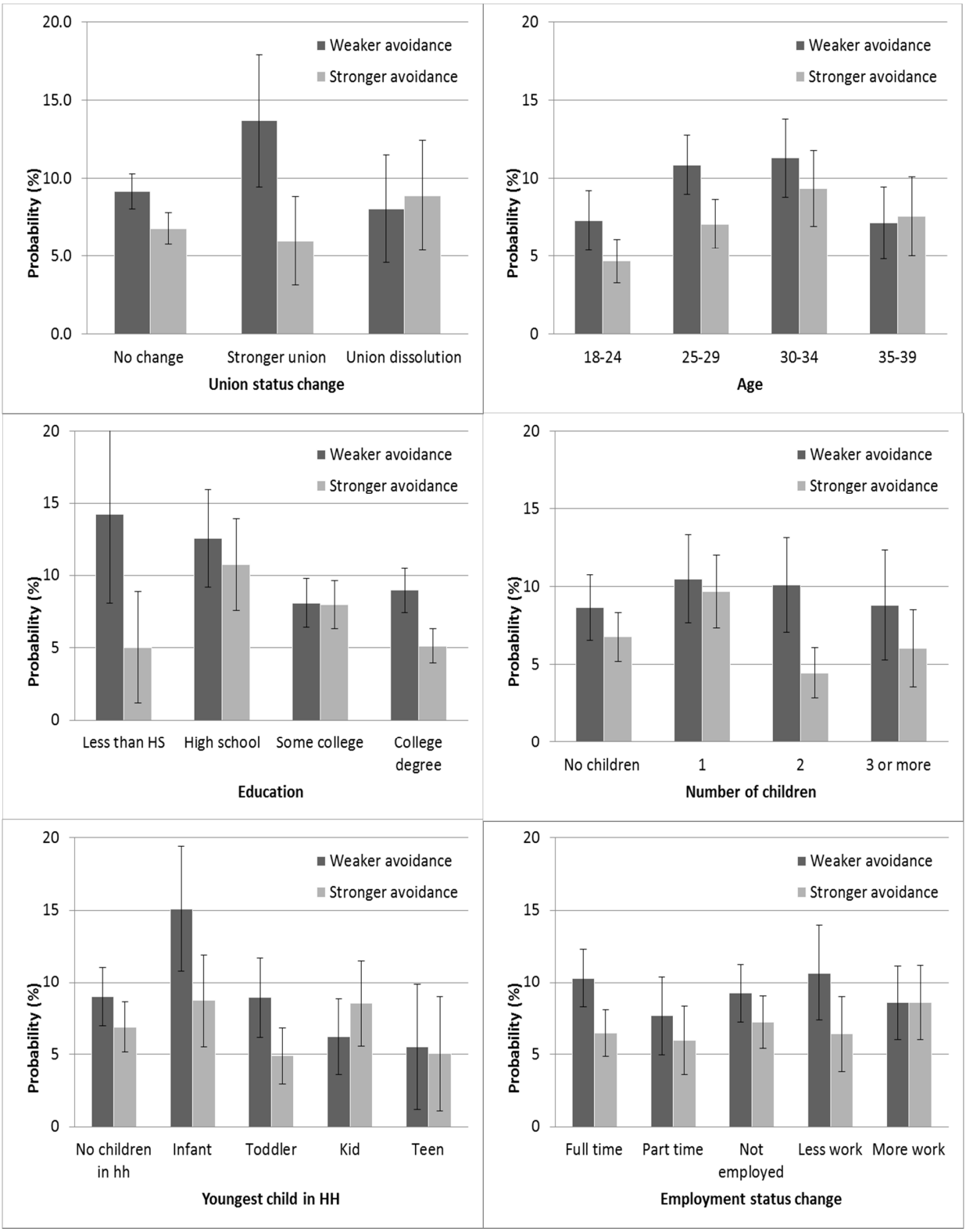
Pregnancy avoidance	Consistently strong	Never strong	Became weaker	Became strong	Total	N
TOTAL	68	16	9	7	100	3011
UNION STATUS					*p<0.001*	
No change	66	17	9	7	100	2,477
Stronger union	73	9	12	6	100	279
Union dissolution	73	10	7	9	100	255
EMPLOYMENT					*p<0.001*	
Full time	65	19	10	6	100	1,006
Part time	76	11	7	6	100	387
Not working	64	18	11	8	100	780
Less work	68	15	10	7	100	349
More work	72	12	8	8	100	478
AGE AT BASELINE					*p<0.001*	
18-24	79	8	7	5	100	801
25-29	65	17	11	7	100	1,023
30-34	59	20	12	9	100	635
35-39	65	21	7	7	100	552
EDUCATION AT BASELINE					*p<0.001*	
Less than high school	59	22	13	5	100	143
High school	58	19	12	11	100	405
Some college	69	15	8	8	100	1,097
College degree	70	15	10	5	100	1,366
PARITY (Wave II)					*p<0.001*	
0	71	15	8	6	100	1,593
1	58	20	11	11	100	582
2	69	15	11	5	100	529
3 or more	67	16	11	7	100	303
YOUNGEST CHILD IN HH					*p<0.001*	
No children in hh	70	16	8	6	100	1,542
Infant (0-12 months)	60	15	16	9	100	428
Toddler (1-3 yrs)	65	20	10	6	100	570
Kid (4-12 yrs)	68	15	7	10	100	353
Teen (13-19 yrs)	79	11	5	5	100	118
RACE/ETHNICITY					*p= 0.759*	
White	67	17	9	7	100	1,958
Black	65	16	12	7	100	270
Other, Non-Hispanic	72	14	8	6	100	249
Hispanic	67	15	9	8	100	534

Figure 1 Changes in trying, fitted probabilities (%)* with 95% confidence intervals



* Calculated based on multinomial regression comparing outcomes never trying (reference), consistently trying, stopped trying, started trying. Tables including coefficients and p-values available on request.

Figure 2 Changes in avoidance, fitted probabilities (%)* with 95% confidence intervals



* Calculated based on multinomial regression comparing outcomes consistently strong (reference), never strong, became weaker and became stronger. Tables including coefficients and p-values available on request.