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## **The Timing of Pregnancy: Women's Interpretations of Planned and Unplanned Pregnancy**

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**Abstract** In this paper, we apply the concept of timing to explore the meaning that women attach towards planned and unplanned pregnancy. We conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with 42 Canadian women who were pregnant or recently gave birth to examine how they experience the transition to motherhood. We contend that the timing of pregnancy is a socially constructed norm that impacts women through a complex range of life events and circumstances. Participants' accounts suggest a gamut of compliance, ambivalence, and defiance towards the "timing of pregnancy" standards. Situating women's decisions on childbearing within the continuum of their life trajectories and societal expectations surrounding pregnancy allows for better understanding of the interplay between women's personal choices and the social norms informing these decisions.

**Keywords** Pregnancy; Planned and Unplanned Pregnancy; Timing; Women's Interpretations; Transition to Motherhood

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In Canada, pregnancy is expected to be a planned event, properly situated among other social transitions (Sassler, Miller, and Favinger 2009). The age, marital status, and socio-economic status of the mother often define social attitudes towards pregnancy (Berryman 1991; Litt 2000; Friese, Becker, and Nachtigall 2008). Women who do not fit the “norm” can be stigmatized as mothers of questionable value (Woollett 1991; Douglas and Michaels 2004). A set of social indicators of appropriate mothering suggests that women should not be “too young” or “too old” during childbearing; they should not be “too poor,” “too sick,” or have “too many children” (Friese et al. 2008). The socially constructed notions of motherhood in western society suggest that the desire to have children is rooted in “natural,” biological instincts of women (Phoenix and Woollett 1991), yet the reproductive practices are expected to be controlled by women and meticulously planned. Social expectations regarding the appropriate timing of pregnancy are not a new phenomenon—women’s reproductive freedom has always been constrained by patriarchy and subjected to a set of strict normative regulations (O’Brien 1989). The loosening of some norms (e.g., getting married before pregnancy) has given rise to the ideology of intensive mothering which prompts women to invest considerable financial and emotional resources in their children (Hays 1998). These expectations altered the sequencing of pregnancy in women’s life course, positioning it after completion of education and (for middle-class women) establishing a career (Ranson 2009). Moreover, the availability of a birth-control pill and other methods of contraception firmly entrenches the expectation that re-

production should be a well-planned event (Locke and Budds 2013).

Given the responsibility placed on women for the emotional and economic stability of their children (Villabolas 2014), it is not surprising that many women postpone pregnancy until they feel emotionally and financially ready (Gregory 2007). Coupled with an increase in the mother’s age at first childbirth—an average of 30 years for Canadian women (Statistics Canada 2016), the drop in total fertility rate has been a common feature of demographic change in most developed countries, including Canada (Waldby and Cooper 2008). At the same time, the image of the “ticking biological clock,” prevalent in popular media, hints that childbearing should not be postponed for too long (Leung 2009; Yale University 2012). The goal of this paper is to explore how the societal norms around the timing of pregnancy inform women’s experiences of the transition to motherhood. Analyzing qualitative interviews with 42 Canadian women who, during the time of the interview, were either pregnant or gave birth to a child in the past 12 months, we examine (1) how women perceive the timing of their pregnancy and (2) how their personal perceptions intersect with societal expectations about the appropriate scheduling of pregnancy. Although women’s perceptions of the timing of pregnancy are informed by societal expectations, findings indicate a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of childbearing. This is evident in the participants’ accounts that suggest a range of compliance with the social norms, ambivalence towards them, and, in some cases, overt defiance towards “timing of pregnancy” standards.

## Theoretical Framework

### The Concept of Timing and Human Agency

Relying on an interpretive paradigm which envisions individuals as active social agents, we explore how women negotiate the meaning of their transition to motherhood within the context of social norms and expectations. Guiding this analysis is the concept of timing. Borrowed from the life course perspective (see: Bengtson, Burgess, and Parrott 1997; Connidis 2010), timing refers to social expectations about when life events should occur. Timing is closely linked to life transitions which initiate shifts in social identity triggered by major life events such as the birth of a child or marriage (Elder 1998). Since individuals move across their life course with a set of culturally informed expectations about the proper order or sequence of transitions, the timing of such events is often regulated by societal expectations. Some of these are formally institutionalized, such as the age for obtaining a driver's license or voting, while others are set informally, such as the expected age of childbearing. Events that are experienced "on-time" are expected and socially approved. "Off-time" events, however, can be stressful and/or socially disapproved. Hence, timing and sequencing mediate the impact of life events and transitions on personal biography (Connidis 2010). Choices and actions are also impacted by the opportunities and constraints of social history and circumstance (Elder 1998). Regardless, timing and sequencing are socially constructed concepts that only hold meaning when the complex social contexts of people's lives are defined and interpreted within these parameters by individuals themselves.

The literature on women's transition to motherhood acknowledges the importance of structural and contextual factors that shape the experiences of childbearing. While the contextualization of personal experiences in a larger web of structural and social factors is not new in the research on parenting (see, e.g., Kaplan 1997; Fox 2009), our analysis contributes to this literature in two interrelated ways. First, our focus on the *meaning* that women attach to the timing of pregnancy captures the nuanced understanding of this societal norm. Second, we explore how women's agency is enforced in responding to the socially constructed "appropriate" timing of pregnancy.

### Cultural Concept of Marriage and Childbearing

Cultural expectations surrounding the timing of pregnancy are rooted in a mix of history, biology, and ideology that impact childbearing beliefs and practices. While men contribute to childbirth biologically and socially, women are the ones who actually give birth. As feminist scholars have pointed out, in all too many societies women have roles subordinate to men and their reproduction is controlled by the patriarchal order of their communities (O'Brien 1989; Katz Rothman 1998). Lacking an active, physiological role in reproduction, men historically have regulated women's sexuality. Publically acknowledging the familial relationship to a child by giving him/her the father's last name or restricting reproduction to the nuclear, patriarchal families are just two examples of the successful attempts of men in western societies to regulate women's reproductive work (O'Brien 1989; Katz Rothman 1998).

While patriarchy continues to influence marital and familial relationships (Katz Rothman 1998), recent historical, economic, and cultural changes have somewhat altered traditional normative transitions into childbearing. The women's liberation movement that swept North America in the sixties prompted women to demand more control over their bodies and over reproductive choices (Davis-Floyd 1992). The invention of the birth-control pill and the growing financial and economic independence of women have contributed to delays in marriage and parenting transitions (Goldin and Katz 2000; Fox 2009). Demographic trends indicate that the birth among unmarried women have increased substantially in the past twenty years in many western countries, including the United States (from 18.4 in 1980 to 40.6 in 2008) and Canada (from 12.7 in 1980 to 27.3 in 2007) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2003). Combined with the decrease in marriage during the same time period (for 1980-2008, the rate dropped from 15.9 to 10.6 in the U.S. and from 11.5 to 6.4 in Canada), these trends indicate that more women give birth outside of legal, heterosexual marriage, and they do so more often than 30 years ago.

Women's participation in the labor force has also increased dramatically in the past several decades. Although women have been working outside the house throughout the 20th century, the majority of these women were single, divorced, or widowed, and marriage was usually associated with cessation of paid employment. An increased number of married women are now in the labor force (Beaujot 2000). In 2009, close to 80% of Canadian married women were in paid employment (Statistics Canada 2011).

In part, labor force participation has been influenced through greater opportunity for education. Post secondary education has flourished in recent decades and women now outnumber men in obtaining undergraduate degrees, with the exceptions of traditionally male-dominated fields, such as engineering and mathematics (Statistics Canada 2011). Expansion of post-secondary education and decrease in employment opportunities delay the transition to adulthood. As a result, we have seen a continuous increase in the age of women having their first child (Mitchell 2006).

The changes in women's labor force participation are not only evident in the numbers of women working outside the home but also in the type of work they perform. While traditionally "feminine" professions, such as nursing or teaching, continue to be dominated by women, the percentage of women in "male" professions has also increased dramatically (Adams 2005; Heru 2005; Hilbrecht et al. 2008). The rising number of women, however, has not eliminated gender discrimination in the workplace, and women often struggle to combine paid employment with family life. As Ranson (2009) suggests, this can result in postponing childbearing until establishment in the workplace is achieved, due to fear that childbearing will negatively affect women's career advancements, especially in the workplaces dominated by men.

### **The Ideology of Mothering: Choice and Responsibility**

While women often continue to be seen as mothers "by nature," *good* mothering requires the acquisition

of normative skills and practices (Hays 1998). In order to be a good mother, women have to prepare themselves emotionally and intellectually (Phoenix and Woollett 1991). The ideology of “intensive mothering,” prevalent in our society, suggests that women should constantly invest in their children emotionally, physically, and financially (Hays 1998). Thus, mothering becomes a full-time job, requiring devotion, dedication, and sacrifice from women.

These expectations are conveyed to women even before the child is born. During pregnancy, women are expected to adhere to prenatal norms and regulations established by medical professionals in order to ensure successful fetal development (Copelton 2007). Pregnancy is expected to be a planned event, which signifies the woman’s *readiness* to take on the responsibility of becoming a mother. The planned nature of the event is sometimes seen as pivotal in defining the meaning of pregnancy for women and for people around them (McMahon 1995). It has been demonstrated that older women, who postponed pregnancy until they established themselves financially and professionally, felt that their decision to wait aligned with social expectations concerning pregnancy (Gregory 2007). On the other hand, young, teenage mothers are often perceived as getting pregnant without meticulous planning, and teen mothers are often socially devalued (Davies, McKinnon, and Rains 2001; Duncan 2007).

The contemporary ideology of mothering is not only gendered but also a class- and culture-specific enterprise (Fox 2006; Johnston and Swanson 2006; Gillies 2007). The consumption practices associated with good mothering and the ability to demonstrate

devotion to a child’s development require considerable financial means and strict adherence to cultural scripts that are consistent with the ideology of intensive mothering (Hays 1998). Lacking access to these resources, lower-income, and racialized women practice motherhood differently from the middle-class norm, which is evident in their choices of prenatal care, medical decision-making (Litt 2000; Brubaker 2007), and their parenting strategies (Lareau 2002). But, the failure of these mothers to abide by the expectations of intensive mothering places them under constant social scrutiny, and this often results in marginalization and stigmatization (Neiterman 2012).

Implicitly embedded in the ideology of intensive mothering is the normative importance of marriage. Women are required to devote themselves fully to the well-being of the child, while the financial stability of the family is assumed to be provided by the father. This sets the image of a nuclear family as an ideal setting for child-rearing. Sequencing pregnancy outside of marriage is therefore largely incompatible with the practice of intensive mothering. Studies suggest that childbearing outside of marriage is associated with negative health and social consequences for the mother and the child (Abma et al. 1997; Terry-Humen, Manlove, and Moore 2001), and, disproportionately, the negative attitudes towards extra-marital pregnancy are born by teen and lower social class mothers (Davies et al. 2001; Duncan 2007; Gillies 2007).

While biological age seems to dominate the literature on “off-time” pregnancy, such a focus is largely based on the social norms and social disapproval experienced by childbearing women (Friese et al.

2008). We know considerably less about *women's* perceptions of the timing of pregnancy and how their childbearing experiences are affected by their personal biographies, which may or may not be consistent with socially constructed norms surrounding childbearing. Addressing this gap in the literature, this paper explores how women's perceptions about the timing of their pregnancy are informed by social norms and their personal biographies. This allows us to see women as active social agents, able to adapt, reinterpret, and resist the social norms surrounding the timing of pregnancy.

## Methods

This paper is based on the qualitative analysis of 42 interviews with pregnant women and new mothers. The interviews were conducted for a study examining women's experience of the transition to motherhood. To analyze how women's experiences are changing over the course of pregnancy and after giving birth, 17 women were interviewed while pregnant (8 weeks to 39 weeks) and the remainder were interviewed 2-12 months postpartum. The interviews were conducted with women of diverse age groups, including teen mothers (n=11), women in their twenties (n=7), thirties (n=22), and mothers over age 40 (n=2). Among these women, 22 were born in Canada and five of these women self-identified as members of visible minorities groups. The rest were immigrants. Four women, including one immigrant woman, reported belonging to an upper income bracket, twelve women, of whom the majority were teen mothers, reported low to no income, and the rest of the respondents reported living on middle income. First-time mothers constituted about 1/3 of

the sample and the rest had 2-4 children. All women were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

The interviews were conducted in 2007-2008 with women residing in Ontario, Canada. The study received approval from McMaster Research Ethics Board. About half of the respondents were recruited via snowball sampling through personal networks and the networks of the respondents. Ten teen mothers were recruited in an educational and residential facility designed for young mothers who want to complete their high school education. Most immigrant mothers were recruited through prenatal classes for newcomers. Teen mothers and immigrant mothers were offered a \$5 gift certificate in compensation for the interview.

The interviews were semi-structured and focused on the woman's transition to motherhood, pregnancy experiences, the chronology of pregnancy, the postpartum period, and the change in the woman's communication with others during pregnancy. Women who had given birth before the interview were asked to reflect on their past experiences and compare their previous pregnancies with the more recent one. The interviews lasted between 1-1.5 hours and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The data were coded in NUD\*IST 6 and analyzed for emerging themes. The inductive coding of the data followed Charmaz's (2006) guidelines, moving from line-by-line coding to a more focused analysis. The theme of the timing of pregnancy emerged during the analysis. About one third of the respondents defined their pregnancies as "unplanned." Utilizing the conceptualization of the "on-" and "off-time"

events articulated by the life course perspective, in what follows, we demonstrate how women experienced their transition to motherhood and how they negotiated the meaning of their pregnancy vis-à-vis social expectations about its timing.

## Findings

### On-Time Pregnancy: Social Approval and Personal Ambivalence

Among married women of childbearing age, pregnancy is perceived as a desirable and expected transition (Phoenix and Woollett 1991; Bailey 1999; 2001). Women in our sample were fully aware of this expectation. Most of them felt that pregnancy was a welcomed event in their lives and that it coincided with the expectations that were placed on them by others. Reflecting on her first pregnancy at the age of 32, Debra, a 34-year-old married mother of two, noted:

I always felt that I looked old enough, and I wore a wedding ring, and I felt like the society approved of me being pregnant...

While Debra later commented that she felt uneasy to disclose her pregnancy at the workplace where she just started her new promising career, she also said that her superiors and her colleagues were not surprised to find out about her pregnancy and even “expected” it to happen. Women like Debra—married, with middle/upper-class income, in their late 20s and early 30s—carefully planned their pregnancies. They discussed their pregnancy with the partners, identified “the right time” to get pregnant, and felt overwhelming (and, indeed, sometimes pres-

uring) support from their family and close friends to “begin a family.” For most of them, sharing the news about pregnancy initiated a jubilation among their significant others and even complete strangers:

Everyone was pretty excited when I was pregnant and everyone was supporting me, and everyone made fuss about the belly, and touched it, and commented on how cute it was...I loved the attention towards my pregnancy and people got so excited from it that I got excited, too. [Chelsea, 31-year-old married mother of one]

Married and financially stable, Chelsea aroused excitement and social approval featuring her pregnant body in public. While for some women becoming the center of attention during pregnancy can be an unwelcomed transition (Neiterman 2012), Chelsea, as well as some other women in our sample, was happy with the contagious excitement that her pregnancy brought into her interactions with others. The positive attention given by people around her reinforced Chelsea’s perception that her pregnancy was a life course transition that was welcomed and socially approved by others.

Similarly to Debra and Chelsea, the majority of women who we interviewed for this study planned their pregnancy, ensuring that it is properly situated within their life course. For most women, the signifier of the readiness to get pregnant was getting off the birth-control pill or other methods of contraception. Sometimes women conceived almost immediately, but much more often conception took time. For some, the waiting period was quite prolonged, and although anticipated, the plan to “get pregnant”

often evolved into the *possibility* of pregnancy. Exhausted from continuous anticipation, which could have lasted between a few months to a year, some women preferred to engage in their daily lives without focusing on their desire to become pregnant. In some instances, the realization of pregnancy, as Jessica suggested, created a significant life disruption:

I think because I had many difficulties with menstruation cycle, initially, I didn't know that I was pregnant and I was kind of guessing that I was pregnant a lot of times and then I wasn't. So...it was probably...about six weeks when I realized that I am pregnant. And even though I was expecting this pregnancy, it was somewhat sudden for me. I was in the middle of a project at work. And it took me some time to get used to the thought that I am pregnant. [Jessica, 28-year-old, 18 weeks pregnant]

Some other women also found the news about pregnancy unsettling, noting that they "didn't expect it [to] happen so quickly," and reported that it "would take some time" to get used to the idea of being pregnant. In making sense of their ambivalent feelings towards anticipated, yet unexpected, pregnancy, women tried to time the acknowledgement of pregnancy in a way that would allow them to complete work commitments and attend to personal matters:

I was feeling...that maybe I am pregnant...But, I...was working on my comprehensive exam and I didn't do the [pregnancy] test right away because I was thinking that if I found out that I was pregnant, I would be too distracted. So I kind of postponed doing it, and by the time I did the test, I wasn't that surprised by the results, I kind of felt that I am pregnant already. And

I also was planning to get pregnant, so it wasn't a big surprise for me. [Michelle, 31-year-old mother of one]

Similar to other women, Michelle was ready to have a child, but sought to situate childbearing into an array of other plans in order to maintain coherence in her personal life. Although pregnancy among these middle-class, married women was socially expected and desirable, situated within their personal biographies, it was not necessarily viewed as an "on-time" event. Reflecting on their attitudes towards the timing of their own pregnancies, some women expressed ambivalence and uneasiness once learning that they were pregnant. The "on-time" pregnancy, therefore, had two dimensions—it was welcomed and expected by women and people around them, but, occasionally, expectant mothers could still perceive it as "sudden" and "disrupting," even if only for a short period of time.

### **Off-Time Pregnancy: Accepting and Challenging the Norms**

Prior to getting pregnant, women are expected to finish their education, achieve financial stability, be in their late 20's to early 30's, and have a meaningful relationship with a supportive partner. When pregnancy occurs before the successful completion of these transitions, it is often construed as an "off-time" event. The mere definition of the "off-time" event does not always call for a social reprimand; cases of chronic illness experienced by young adults can illustrate the situation in which an "off-time" event is perceived as unfortunate but unpredictable (Williams 1984). An off-time pregnancy, however, is often seen as an event that *is* preventable, and



women who do not time their pregnancies according to socially approved norms are blamed for being irresponsible (Macleod 2001; Bonell 2004).

In the literature on pregnancy, teen mothering is most often constructed as an “off-time” event that poses physical and social risk to the mother and the child (Bonell 2004; Duncan 2007; Breheny and Stephens 2008). Teenage mothers are seen as reckless, relying on the support of the state, being unable to complete their education and find a proper job, and lacking partner’s support (Duncan 2007; Gupta and Jain 2008; Neiterman 2013). Moreover, when pregnancy is planned by young mothers, it is assumed to be desired for all the wrong reasons (Musick 1993).

All young women who participated in this study were highly critical of planned teen pregnancy and raised their disapproval with teen pregnancy as a social phenomenon. All of them defined their own pregnancies as unplanned and all but one practiced some form of birth control. Reflecting on their transition to parenthood, teen mothers defined it as unplanned and highly disruptive. Echoing the accounts of other teen mothers, Vicky, a 19-year-old mother of one, recalls:

It was such a change in my lifestyle because I was young, well, I am still young, but anyway...I was having one lifestyle and then, when I found out that I am pregnant, I had to make a 360 turn, and it was really hard...I couldn’t go to clubs and didn’t go dancing and I couldn’t do other stuff that my friends did...

For Vicky, the “off-timing” of pregnancy is signified by her inability to continue the life of a teenager.

Comparing her new life of a pregnant woman to the lives of her peers, Vicky sees pregnancy as disrupting the routine of growing up—having fun and enjoying her previous lifestyle. Vicky’s words echo the sentiments of other young mothers who talked about the disruption that pregnancy caused in their lives.

While the disturbing impact of the off-time pregnancy was evident in the narratives of young mothers, some young women questioned the conventional discourse on the negative outcomes of teen pregnancy, especially on educational and career opportunities:

I got [negative comments] probably mostly at school... People would look at me differently...At school I felt that people thought, “Oh, you shouldn’t be here” or maybe, like, “You are a student and you are too young [to have a child]”...But, I finished my school regardless. [Brenda, 19-year-old mother of one]

Brenda challenges the social consensus that the transition to motherhood should be postponed until the completion of education. Her pregnant and maternal body disrupts the university setting where she obtains her undergraduate degree. Qualitative studies inquiring into the experiences of teenage parenthood demonstrated that teen mothering can be experienced positively (Coleman and Cater 2006; Brubaker 2007; Arai 2009) and the availability of social policies supporting young mothers may enhance successful transition to motherhood (Bonell 2004; Greene 2006). Delayed childbearing is often associated with White, middle-class culture and many teen mothers and women from marginalized

groups do not experience mothering in a similar way (Kaplan 1997; Geronimus 2003; Brubaker and Wright 2006). For some young teens, transition to motherhood fosters the feeling of responsibility, motivating them to pursue education (Smith Battle 2007), thus challenging the conventional order of social transitions from completion of education to mothering.

Moreover, the ambiguity of chronological age as a determinant of successful mothering has been challenged by some of the participants, including 19-year-old Jenn:

A lot of my [teen] friends who had babies go to school [even though they] had babies. But, there are other girls [or women] who don't go to school...or don't work...They are not ready to be mothers...And just by looking at people on the street, you can't really say if they are going to school or they do nothing, if they are good mothers or not. So, you really shouldn't judge those people...And you shouldn't care what other people are saying anyway—you are about to become a mother. You should care only about your baby, and not the gossip or what people are saying. [Jenn, 19-year-old mother of one]

As Jenn notes, although chronological age is often associated with the growing sense of responsibility, "bad" mothering is not necessarily the marker of younger mothers. Jenn links good mothering to the ability to provide for the child and to the woman's readiness to devote herself to her child's well-being. Since Jenn defines herself as a mature person, situated within her personal biography, her pregnancy can be interpreted as an "on-time" event.

Recently, developments in reproductive technologies have spurred debates about being "too old" for pregnancy. The definition of being "too old" is contested as more and more women decide to pursue mothering at an older age (Gregory 2007; Friese et al. 2008). These women are usually well-educated and financially secure (Berryman 1991; Gregory 2007), and, depending on their age, may blend visibly and socially with mothers who are perceived to have children at a socially appropriate time.

Among our participants, only two women gave birth after the age of 40 and both of these women had given birth previously as well. Similar to teen mothers, the ambivalence with which these women experienced their pregnancy was intimately related to their age at childbearing. On the one hand, this pregnancy marked their bodies as "not too old" to have a child. On the other hand, chronologically, age seemed to be a reminder that pregnancy at this point in the life course remains outside of conventional social norms:

I had two miscarriages between my first pregnancy and my second one and while I was fine the first time around, then you are facing it again, and the second time you are 42. I felt like, oh my God, what have I done? [Miranda, 42-year-old mother of one, 35 weeks pregnant]

Miranda considers her age to be a potential indicator of making the wrong decision about childbearing. Unlike teen mothers, who were publicly stigmatized, the older mothers did not report any negative comments in communication with others. Nevertheless, the internalization of socially inscribed age norms challenged these mothers' perceptions regarding the

appropriateness of timing of pregnancy. Their perception of societal expectations of childbearing made them feel uncomfortable and uncertain about their pregnancies.

Although chronological age is fundamental to the analysis of the timing of pregnancy, other asynchronous events can complicate or interfere with normative expectations. These add another layer of complexity to the concept of “off-time” within the trajectory of motherhood. The case of Anna, described below, demonstrates this.

After dissolution of her first marriage, which left her with one school-aged child, Anna married again at the age of 33 and within less than a year gave birth to her second child. Anna’s family was well-off financially and her friends and relatives were supportive and excited during her second pregnancy. When Anna unexpectedly got pregnant again, while still breastfeeding her seven-month-old child, she realized that this pregnancy was viewed as an “off-time” event by people around her:

And I knew that majority of people will be really surprised that I am doing it again...And I think that a lot of people judge me for that...I didn’t tell anybody that I was pregnant. I didn’t want people to judge me...I saw when my friend got pregnant with her 4th child soon after having her third, she was really pissed that people would come and say, “Are you crazy? Why did you get pregnant again?” And she was shocked at that reaction of people...I guess that having too many children is looked down upon, especially when you are having one after another. [Anna, 34-year-old mother of two, 34 weeks pregnant]

The differences in social responses to Anna’s second and third pregnancies illustrate the social attitudes towards the timing of motherhood. The hard work of child-rearing, consistent with the ideology of intensive mothering, presupposes the woman’s complete devotion to her child (Hays 1998). When two children are too close in age, the ability of their mother to take care of them may be questioned. While during her second pregnancy Anna’s transition to motherhood was celebrated, the consecutive pregnancy was perceived as an “off-time” event. Situated too closely to the previous pregnancy, Anna’s subsequent pregnancy was defined by people around her as not properly planned in terms of timing.

## Discussion and Conclusion

When pregnancy is situated outside of the conventional path of childbearing, women often are faced with social disapproval and meet overt or silent criticism regarding their decision to have a child. Social criticism is not restricted to merely questioning the timing of the transition to motherhood; it casts doubt on the ability of the woman to mother her child (Phoenix and Woollett 1991). Since for many women mothering continues to be one of the most dominant components of self-identity, when this status is threatened, it can have significant implications for one’s sense of self. Therefore, when pregnancy is situated outside of the socially approved time frame, the expectant mothers conform to the ideology of intensive mothering even more eagerly, seeking to demonstrate that they can, indeed, be good mothers (Neiterman 2012).

This paper demonstrates that women are aware of the social expectations surrounding the timing

of pregnancy, but this awareness does not always reflect the actual experiences of pregnancy as an “off-time” or “on-time” event at the individual level. Even when women carefully plan their pregnancies and follow established social norms, the intersection of the transition to motherhood with other life events and transitions may create ambivalent feelings about the timing of pregnancy. For example, when the timing of pregnancy is perceived to be inconsistent with social norms, women, depending on the context of their personal biographies, may experience this transition as an “on-time” event. Although these women may face significant social disapproval, they may see the timing of pregnancy as properly fitting their life transitions.

Our findings demonstrate that “on-” and “off-time” events are constructed not only through social norms and expectations (Elder 1998) but are also experienced and interpreted by individuals vis-à-vis their personal histories and biographies. Evaluating the timing of their transition to motherhood, women in our study assessed the impact of pregnancy on their overall life course trajectories and this assessment did not always align with the socially constructed norm of the timing of pregnancy. Women's accounts suggest a range of responses that include compliance, ambivalence, and overt defiance towards the normative “timing of pregnancy.” The analysis of the *process* by which individuals define “on-” or “off-time” events as fitting or misaligned with their personal biography can contribute to the existing literature on life course theory.

In addition to our contributions to the life course perspective, this paper seeks to inform the litera-

ture on the transition to motherhood, which tends to treat the biological age of a woman as a core variable that can explain women's perceptions about the timing of pregnancy (Furstenberg 2003; Gregory 2007). Moreover, the attention paid to “older” and “younger” mothers' perceptions about their pregnancies rests on implicit assumption that “unplanned” pregnancy is more likely to happen among these women (Berryman 1991). Explaining women's nuanced understanding of the socially appropriate timing of pregnancy, we showed that biological age and marital status do not always coincide with the way women interpret the timing of pregnancy.

While our sample was rather diverse, we were unable to differentiate between the role of age, income, and social support in shaping the context in which women came to terms with their pregnancies. Most women in our sample were either married or had common-law partners; all teen mothers had steady boyfriends and, despite their low income, relied on social and financial support from their families. We believe that further research that considers class, age, marital status, and other markers of social position as a context in which women make sense of their pregnancy can enrich our understanding of women's experiences of transition to motherhood.

In conclusion to this paper, we would like to call for further research on the personal experiences of individuals who breach the conventional order of social transitions. Some events that are perceived to be “off time” mostly entail personal costs and emotional uneasiness. In other cases, “off time” events may set off a course of transitions that can result

in social disapproval, stigmatization, and marginalization. Teen pregnancy can serve as an example of an “off-time” event which can produce the stigma of being an unworthy mother. At the same time, looking at teen mothers it is evident that the convention-

al order of life course transitions can be challenged by individuals and that qualitative exploration of individual experiences allows for better understanding of the variety of responses that major life events may trigger in social actors.

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