

The Language of Risk: Pregnancy and Childbirth in the COVID-19 Era

Authors : Sarah Holdren, Laura Crook, Anne Drapkin Lyerly

Abstract : Objective: The COVID-19 Pandemic has drawn new attention to long-existing bioethical questions around pregnancy, childbirth, and parenthood. Due to the increased risk of severe COVID-19, pregnant individuals may experience anxiety regarding medical decision-making. Especially in the case of hospital births, questions around the ethics of bringing healthy pregnant individuals into a high-risk environment for viral transmission illuminate gaps in the American maternal and child healthcare system. Limited research has sought to understand the experiences of those who gave birth outside hospitals during this time. This study aims to understand pregnant individuals' conceptualization of risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. Methods: Individuals who gave birth after March 2020 were recruited through advertisements on social media. Participants completed a 1-hour semi-structured interview and a demographic questionnaire. Interviews were transcribed and coded by members of the research team using thematic narrative analysis. Results: A total of 18 participants were interviewed and completed the demographic questionnaire. The language of risk was utilized in birth narratives in three different ways, which highlighted the multileveled and nuanced ways in which risk is understood and mitigated by pregnant and birthing individuals. These included: 1. The risk of contracting COVID-19 before, during, and after birth, 2. The risk of birth complications requiring medical interventions dependent on selected birthing space (home, birthing center, hospital), and 3. The overall risk of creating life in the middle of a pandemic. The risk of contracting COVID-19 and risk of birth complications were often weighed in paradoxical ways throughout each individual's pregnancy, while phrases such as "pandemic baby" and "apocalypse" appeared throughout narratives and highlighted the broader implications of pregnancy and childbirth during this momentous time. Conclusions: Healthcare professionals should consider the variety of ways that pregnant and birthing individuals understand the risk when counseling patients on healthcare decisions, especially during times of healthcare crisis such as COVID-19. Future work should look to understand how the language of risk fits into a broader understanding of the human experience of growing life in times of crisis.

Keywords : maternal and child health, thematic narrative analysis, COVID-19, risk mitigation

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