Reviewer's report

Title: Perceived stress and emotional social support among women who are denied or receive abortions in the United States: a prospective cohort study

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Reviewer: Kelli Hall

Reviewer's report:

This article describes findings from a national prospective cohort study of women who were provided or denied an abortion. The researchers build upon their previous reports and ongoing work about the health and social consequences of abortion versus unwanted childbearing and here focus on the outcomes of stress and social support immediately following abortion-seeking and then over a 30 month period. Overall, I felt that this manuscript was extremely well-written, clear and focused, and provided new and interesting findings which offer a unique contribution to the broader literature on mental health and wellbeing and abortion. I think the methods used are appropriate and rigorous and the results are clearly presented. Overall, the majority of my comments and suggestions are minor. Two larger issues may need to be addressed – 1) a more in-depth discussion and reference to the literature in a few important places in the discussion section (which I describe below) and, 2) presentation of covariate point estimates in Table 2 and 3 and in the text, along with a mention of those that were significantly associated with stress and social support in the discussion. The latter is important given the limited generalizability of this sample and would help readers contextualize these findings better. Specific comments/suggestions/questions are as follows.

Abstract:

Is “trajectories” in the abstract an accurate usage (since it doesn’t appear that latent curve models were used or that trajectories were formally analyzed)? I would be more specific (i.e. social support scores did not differ between groups initially or over time). Same comment applies for the last results paragraph in text.

While I fully agree and am familiar with the literature on stress and pregnancy outcomes, these results don’t seem to support the last abstract conclusion statement given that similar stress scores were noted among women denied abortion. I would consider removing from abstract and add to the text where more reference to the literature and how these findings fit within can be made and would be useful.

Background:

The introductory paragraph could benefit from a few specific details, for instance, that “abortion is harmful to a women’s wellbeing” – I would specify outcomes
here (i.e. depression, anxiety, suicide, etc). Additionally, this first important paragraph doesn’t read as cohesive to me. I think the problem is with trying to tie in the line about facility gestational limits and abortion restrictions (I understand this is relevant to the larger study but doesn’t seem necessary to set the stage here and so I found it a bit jarring and disruptive).

Perceived stress paragraph – I would give some specific examples of the health consequences.

Methods:
The paragraph describing stressor and stressful life events is a bit confusing. At first I thought that the stressors comprised the “final variable stressful life events” but following the description that doesn’t seem to be the case. I would recommend trying to better distinguish between the two different indicators (if they are in fact different) and how they were used in analyses.

Results:
The retention and follow-up paragraph seems a bit long and wordy, and I’m not sure whether that level of detail is needed for this particular manuscript. I would consider summarizing (assuming that it has been presented elsewhere) or presenting in a figure.

Tables:
The time variables are difficult to interpret in the table. I think these are the interaction terms, which are described in the text but not clear when looking at the tables alone, perhaps because the same symbol is used for interaction and p-value significance. I would change the symbol and add in a footnote.

I would have liked to see full presentation of the covariate estimates in tables 2 and 3, so that readers can put the findings into context. Were all controls significantly associated in models? Do the main point estimates represent full models or reduced models where these covariates were selected because they were the only ones significant? Some greater detail in the both text and tables for these results would be helpful. Additionally, a comment regarding significant covariates and their relationship with stress and social support is needed in the discussion.

Discussion:
The idea of resilience that is mentioned in the last sentence of the paragraph at the bottom of page 12/top of 13 is very interesting and a potentially strong and unique contribution of this study. Thus, it deserves more attention, drawing upon other literature on resilience and childbearing, etc.

It seems that the last limitations paragraph is an extremely important one that is directly related to the social support commentary. I would suggest adding some comments that these data did not permit an assessment of social support and stress before the abortion seeking and that the moment at which this study “interjected” into these women’s lives may represent a peak in stress or low-point
in social support, which would help explain why they both improve over time. I would also recommend moving that limitations paragraph up in that section.

The first two implications paragraphs about clinical interventions do not seem directly supported by this research. It might help to condense them into a single paragraph focused on the immediate findings (that stress was at its worst immediately around the time of abortion seeking (for turnaways and second trimesters), and abortion clinics are a unique and understudied context for stress-related interventions. Even standard abortion counseling does not often deal with stress management and coping, which appears to be reflected as a potential clinical need within these data. Overall, perhaps a more careful commentary about clinical implications is warranted. Also, more clear mention that stress experienced by women receiving late term abortion is also needed throughout (i.e. it wasn’t just turnaways).

Figures – I like the idea of the figures but I’m not certain how helpful they are given the little variance in outcomes. The authors may wish to consider removing them (particularly the social support figure).

**Level of interest:** An article of outstanding merit and interest in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

None to report