

Does your contraceptive method affect your sex life? "No, but ..."

A qualitative exploration



Presented by Marguerite Kelly



Introduction

Background

- Research into sexual impacts, positive and negative, of specific contraceptive methods is mixed and limited¹
- Qualitative accounts are scant
- In Australia, contraception and sexuality are often treated separately, and contraception consultations may neglect sexuality issues²
- It is generally assumed that women make contraceptive choices within a risk-benefit framework

What we know

- Hormone research – e.g. pill & libido mixed evidence¹
- Hormonal contraception impacts mood²
- Bleeding impacts sex life³
- Contraception can impact relationships⁴

Our aims



- We endeavoured to understand women's subjective experiences of the impact (good or bad) of contraception on their sexual lives, and how this influenced contraceptive choice and sexual practice

Methodology

Design

- Recruitment: snowball sampling, Facebook, noticeboard advertisements at clinics, doctors' offices and university facilities
- Eligibility: **Women aged 16–49** who had used contraception
- **94** open-ended interviews (28–101 minutes)
- Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using a thematic approach

Contraceptive Understandings and Experiences Study

**Are you a woman aged 16 to 49?
Have you used contraception?**



We want to hear what that has been like for you!

Who are we and why are we doing this?
Family Planning NSW, the University of Wollongong and the University of Sydney are working to improve health care and contraceptive services for women. To do this, we need a better understanding of what women in Australia think about different contraceptive methods, and if contraception has influenced their sexual lives or relationships.

What's your part?
If you decide to participate in the study you will meet one of the researchers and discuss your personal experiences with contraception and the reasons for your choices of method. This discussion will take between 1 and 1 1/2 hours and will be recorded. We will give you \$30 to cover any costs that you may have incurred for your participation.

How to get involved?
Contact Margaret by phone: Mon-Fri: 02 3365 3366/0450 901 420 or email: margaret.kelly@unsw.edu.au 0488 881 428. To arrange a time and place convenient to you. For more information visit: <http://www.sydney.contraceptivestudy.com.au> or <http://www.wollongong.contraceptivestudy.com.au> or www.facebook.com/contraceptivestudyandexperiences

Interview prompts

- Do you think any contraceptive methods have affected your sex life (e.g. sexual enjoyment, interest) (Good or Bad)?
 - Prompt: Relationship and sexual interaction
 - How does your current contraceptive impact on your relationship with your partner
 - And what about your partner's views? Do they influence what you use? (prompt for any experiences with earlier or additional partners- different choices/effects on sex life with different partners)

Results and Discussion

Themes and subthemes: "No...But"

1. **Contraception: a necessary annoyance**
2. **Sex should be natural to be enjoyable**
3. **The hormones are messing with things**
4. **Relationship factors: critical to contraceptive choice and sex life**

1) Contraception: a necessary annoyance

- Positives of contraception outweigh the negatives

"It's better without [contraception]. But it's like something that you have to do I guess. It's just better than having a baby" (*Serena*)

- Varying sexual practices to improve enjoyment

"My boyfriend really likes to have sex without a condom because he feels much more sensitive. So that's why we are not using the condom straight away. [...] So we will just use it when he's kind of ready to go.[...] And he's like No, no, stop, stop, stop, stop, stop! I have to put on condom and then I can eject inside of you" (*Jacinta*)

1) Contraception: a necessary annoyance

- Building contraception into the routine: sex as process

"I've got a bit of a routine [...] I make sure the condom's torn off from the strip of condoms. The two sheets are torn off the paper towel 'cause when you put lube on to wipe your hand off on...like I've got a system [...] it sort of takes a little bit of organisation [...] but it's a bit like brushing your teeth: if you're not in the habit, it's a burden but if it's a habit then you don't think twice about it" (*Pamela*)

- Having control so that you can let go: the liberating effect

"I prefer pills 'cause psychologically, you know you won't get pregnant so you can just let yourself go. [...] I feel like [with] no contraceptives or pills, your vagina is more rigid [...] like it's trying to reject something. Not really rejecting [...] but it's not letting go" (*Yalanda*)

2) Sex should be natural to be enjoyable

- The notion of 'natural' (senses)

"I find that [being] over-zealous [about contraception]... sort of kill[s] the romance [...] [Without condoms] I can feel when my partner orgasms [...] It does feel a lot more intimate [...] I can feel him sort of convulsing." (*Maya*)

- Interrupting the natural flow of sex

"When you have to withdraw [...] it's kind of like suddenly it's done; it's over and you're separate...right in the middle of the act, and you're suddenly ripped apart [...] [Not able to] cuddle together afterwards [...] with him sort of still inside" (*Ruby*)

2) Sex should be natural to be enjoyable

- Feeling the method during sex

"Then I had an IUD [intrauterine device] [...] When I first had sex with it in [he] said it was like someone had cut him. He was in agony. It was very painful and we couldn't have sex until I could get back to the doctor for him to cut the string properly" (*Ruby*)

2) Sex should be natural to be enjoyable

- Contraceptives can cause unpleasurable or reduced sensations

"I find them [condoms] uncomfortable and a bit like itchy and unpleasant afterwards" (*Regina*)

- Internal dialogue about contraception interferes with sexual enjoyment

"I think it can affect your enjoyment if you're using something but you're not 100 per cent [...] confident [...]. So you can have that niggling worry at the back of your mind. So you're not enjoying it as much" (*Hazel*)

3) The hormones are messing with things

- Libido: "I just couldn't be bothered"

"I don't seem to get as turned on when I'm on them [hormonal contraceptives]. Definitely less interested. [...] My body doesn't seem to lubricate as much. I think it's a general numbness. And even during sex itself doesn't seem as pleasurable or as fast to be able to get excited [...] I think there's something in it hormonally that dulls down my wants and needs." (*Ruby*)

"My libido wasn't as strong. I didn't want to have sex as often as I would have without hormonal contraceptives. But it's really hard to judge if [...] you're just getting used to your partner and everything's not as exciting anymore. [...] So I just wanted to check and by getting off the pill I realised that it's indeed the case that the hormones kind of reduce how much intercourse you want to have" (*Phoebe*)

3) The hormones are messing with things

- Being in the 'mood' for sex

"Sometimes you're just not in the mood for it and you've either got to [...] get yourself in the mood. Or you just sort of close your eyes and bear it. Whereas other times I'm very much in the mood [...] and then I'll initiate it" (*Ava*)

"Cause the hormones. It makes you feel moody, or a little bit hormonal and you don't feel like sex" (*Naomi*)

3) The hormones are messing with things

- Bleeding impacts sex life: good and bad

"With the Implanon and the IUD, the bleeding was such a turn-off. And then when I wasn't bleeding I didn't want all the mess that came with the sex" (*Ruby*)

"That's usually when it feels best [sex during period...] when I'm aroused, [...] in the mood" (*Pandra*)

4) Relationship factors: critical to contraceptive choice and sex life

- Changes throughout the life course

"I just got married, so my sex drive is up here at the moment. But before...I did blame the Pill for not having a sex drive in my long-term relationships. But sex drive to me is dependent on more things than just contraception. The state of your relationship. How healthy you are. How much you are exercising. Your mental health.[...] So yes contraception might have affected my sex drive but as did a lot of other things." (*Elise*)

"I kind of lost my libido a long time ago, but I don't know if that's with this Mirena, or just my husband. [...] or just me [...] I could live without it [sex]. I don't really like it anymore. [...] I think it's just a bit of a side effect, the libido, but it's also my age and children" (*Ingrid*).

Conclusion & Take home message

- This large qualitative Australian study is the first of its kind to examine detailed accounts of direct sexual effects of methods.
- The findings suggest impacts on sexuality are of great importance to women's contraceptive choices and practices
 - Libido-muting effect
 - Ambivalence
 - Risk

Final remarks

- Integrating discussions about contraception and sexuality
- Focus on risk fails to engage with experiences, motivations and practices of everyday women

Acknowledgements

We thank the women who took part in our study

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Funding

- Australian Research Council linkage grant (LP110200996)
- The project is in partnership with Family Planning NSW and the University of Sydney



Conflicts of Interest

- Deborah Bateson and Mary Stewart belong to member organisations which conduct clinical trials sponsored by pharmaceutical companies; their organisations receive fees from MSD for contraceptive implant training and sponsorship from Bayer Healthcare for IUD training sessions. DB has received individual support to attend national and international conferences from MSD and Bayer Healthcare. Kirsten Black is a trainer on the implant insertion program supported by MSD. KB is a consultant on an international advisory board for Bayer Healthcare and has received individual support to attend a conference as a presenter.



THANK YOU

For further study information please visit:

<http://sphcm.med.unsw.edu.au/project/contraception-understandings-and-experiences-australian-women>

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