

COLLEGE WOMEN'S USE OF CONTRACEPTIVES
WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR A COLLEGE HEALTH SERVICE

by

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Introduction

Studies of the use of contraceptives by college women began to appear in the 1970's about one decade after the birth control pill became widely used. Interest in this topic was generated by changes in sexual attitudes and sexual behavior and an increase in accompanying social problems, e.g., illegitimate births, unwanted pregnancies, and abortions. A paradoxical situation has developed. There have been increases in premarital sexual intercourse and increases in the availability of contraceptive materials, yet studies indicate widespread failure in contraceptive use. Research is directed towards understanding why this paradoxical situation exists.

This paper presents a review of the literature related to contraceptive use by college women. The literature is presented in six sections. Section one presents approaches and methodology of researchers studying contraceptive usage in college populations and relates the difficulties that have arisen in methodology. Section two presents a descriptive background of sexual activity of college students. Section three reports contraceptive practices including motivations, attitudes, behaviors, and usage patterns of contraceptives by college women in the United States. These studies have been organized under the following headings: 1) Demographic, background, and situational determinants of contraceptive use; 2) Cognitive predictors of contraceptive use; 3) Intra and interpersonal variables moderating contraceptive use; and 4) Social and interactional variables moderating contraceptive use. Section four reviews studies having to do with availability and recent trends in contraceptive use. Section five reports findings of a contraceptive services inquiry developed by this author from the seven regents schools of Kansas. Section six gives implications for college health professionals which have been drawn from the research studies reviewed in the literature.

Approaches and Methodology of Research Studies

Approaches. Many variables have been examined in contraceptive use

studies. In general, researchers have tried to determine the effects of selected intervening variables upon the relationships between contraceptive attitudes and behavior, focusing on motivations, attitudes, and knowledge about contraceptives and their use.

Attempts to construct or test models of contraceptive use among college student populations have been reported in the literature. Delamater and MacCorquodale (1978) tested the utility of two models, developed by Rains and Reiss, et al to explain contraceptive use. Foreit and Foreit (1981) and Crosbie and Bitte (1982) tested Kristin Luker's Model of Contraceptive Risk-taking. Byrne (1977) and Cvetkovich (1975) suggested that use or non-use of contraceptive methods is mediated by relatively stable, or at least slowly changing personality traits. The model incorporates the notion of "affective responses to sexual stimuli" p. 116. McCammon (1982), in a dissertation has proposed a Health Belief Model which applies "the theory of reasoned action" to the use of birth control pills.

A number of theories emanating from these models have been proposed. Since the intervening variables influencing contraceptive use fit roughly into four categories (cognitive, interpersonal, social, and demographic), researchers have used the framework best suited to their area of investigation. Foreit and Foreit (1978) expressed their findings in the structural-functional mode: "Contraceptive behavior seems to be a function of two sets of variables - situational and background" p. 173.

Thompson and Spanier (1978) suggested a developmental view of contraception:

A developmental view implies that the behaviors relating to reproduction and contraception change over time and throughout the life course of the individual. The process applies to both biological and social variables, and acknowledges that the same dimensions of fertility behavior may not apply to all stages of the life span p. 480.

Thompson and Spanier suggested that in searching for explanations, this approach be kept in mind since adolescence and young adulthood are points in the developmental progression. Their study focused on the interactional influences of parents, peers, and partners in the contraceptive use of men and women.

Venham (1972) used the conceptual framework of symbolic interaction in an attempt to discover some of the social variables in the use of contraceptives by unmarried college women. She examined three main elements: self-