



Relationship Satisfaction and Power Dynamics in Couples' Reproductive Health Behaviors

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Background

- **Unintended pregnancies in the U.S.**
 - Almost half of pregnancies are unintended
 - Income, racial, and age disparities exist
- **Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in the U.S.**
 - Are the highest in the industrialized world
 - Age, racial, and gender disparities exist
- **Birth control and condom use**
 - Inconsistent use of contraception is a risk factor for STDs and unintended pregnancies

Background

- **Relationship characteristics and dynamics**
 - Couple level factors associated with condom and birth control use
- **The status quo of the literature**
 - Little research has drawn from both partners in the couple to study contraceptive and condom use
 - There is limited knowledge of *how* and *why* couple level factors influence contraceptive and condom use

Research Questions

- **Using qualitative and quantitative research methods, we examined contraceptive use among African-American couples.**
 1. How does relationship context, quality, and satisfaction shape couples' birth control use and childbearing intentions?
 2. How does partner involvement play a role in couples' birth control use?

Sample

- **Qualitative Sample**
 - 30 African-American participants = 15 couples
 - Recruited from community programs, flyers, Craigslist
- **Quantitative Sample**
 - 256 African-American participants = 128 Couples
 - Romantic Pair subsample from Wave III (2001-02; young adult) of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health)
 - Recruitment from U.S. high schools & middle schools

Methods and Analysis

- **Qualitative Study**

- Semi-structured interviews with couples
 - Interviews were 1.5-2 hours long
- Inductive approach for data analysis:
 - We used open, axial and selective coding
 - Analysis is being conducted in NVivo and SPSS

- **Quantitative Study (Add Health Data)**

- Face-to-face interviews
 - Interviews were 1.5 hours

Qualitative Sample Demographics (N=30)

Table 1.
Primary Respondents' Key Characteristics

Age (Ranged 18-29)

Half are between the ages of 22-24

Income Level

Vast majority made under 25K

Education Level

Half had high school or less

Table 2.
Key Relationship Characteristics

Relationship Status

Half were dating one person

Relationship Length

Half in relationship for more than 2 years

Parenthood Status

Half had children outside relationship

Quantitative Sample Demographics

	Cohabiting	Dating
	(n=60)	(n=68)
Age		
Females (18-30)	22.0 (2.35)	21.3 (1.68)
Males (18-35)	23.6 (3.23)	22.9 (3.04)
Education (high school or less)		
Females *	60%	38%
Males *	88%	60%
Income (less than 20K)		
Females	89%	91%
Males	78%	63%
Biological children in household		
Females *	58%	38%
Males ***	37%	3%

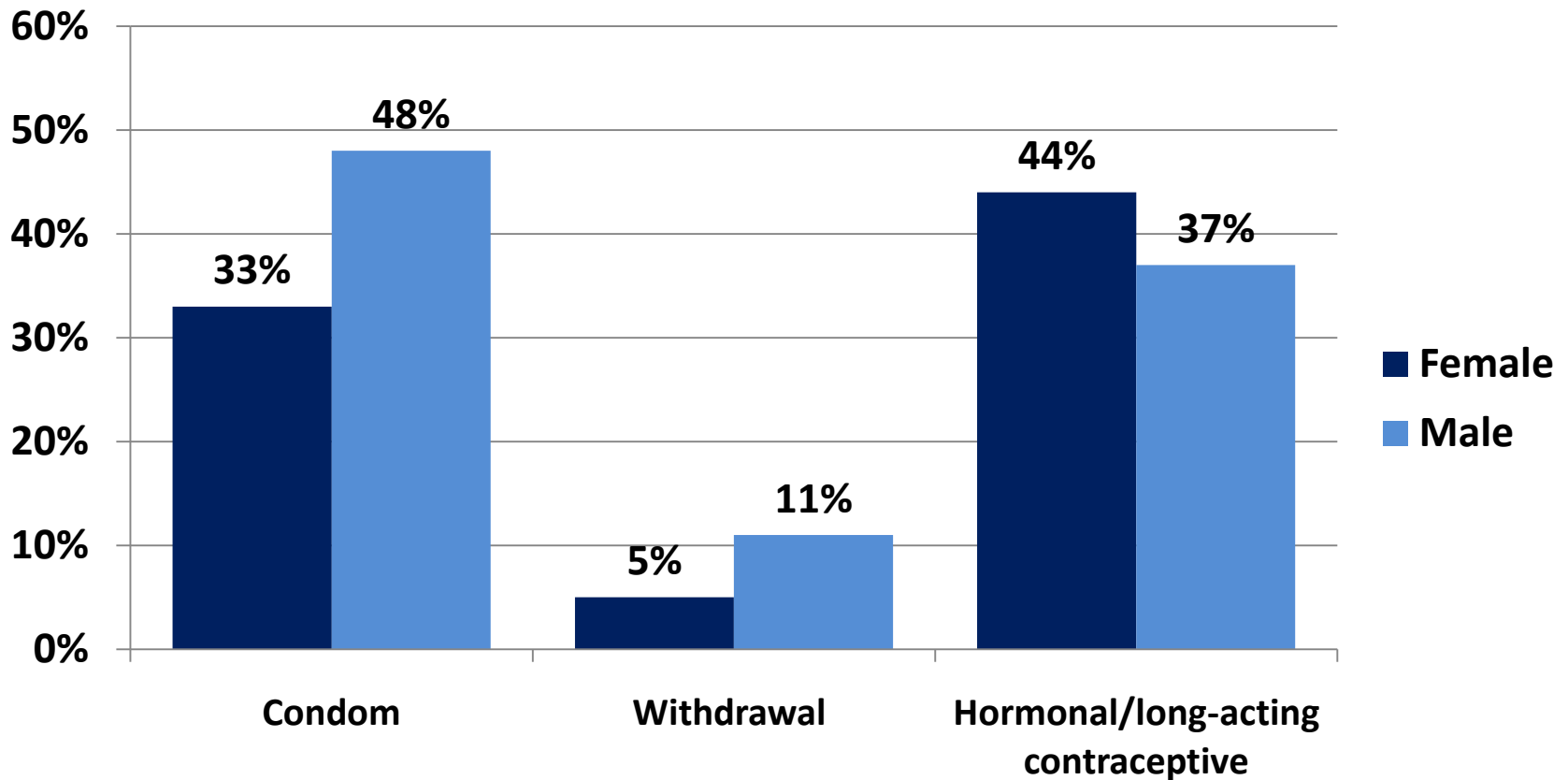
Significance levels: * < .05 *** < .001

Preliminary Results

Qualitative Data: Reports of Birth Control Use

- **Withdrawal and condoms are the most common primary method reported by couples (N=9 couples)**
- **Almost half disagreed about their primary method of birth control (N=7 couples; 47% of sample)**
 - e.g. Female reported condoms as the primary method, male reported withdrawal
- **A quarter disagreed about the consistency of their birth control use (N=4 couples)**

Quantitative Data: Contraceptive Use at Last Sex



Birth Control Use: He Said, She Said

- **One main reason for their contrasting reports:**
 - Lack of awareness of partner's birth control use
 - Men tend to be in the dark about their partners' contraceptive use

“I decided it for myself before I even started talking to him. I didn't like any of the other birth controls, so I said, ‘let's try the Mirena!’. [I didn't talk with him about it] ‘cause I already had it and I'm not taking it out.”

- Ashlee, 25-year-old female, dating partner for >3 years

Power Dynamics within the Couple

- **Two types of power dynamics existed**
 - Control over finances
 - Control of the couples' emotional connection
 - Emotional power = less investment in relationship
- **Many women have more financial control because:**
 - Typically they are employed or receive government support
 - They provide housing, vehicles, etc.
- **Financial control does not seem to shape birth control use**

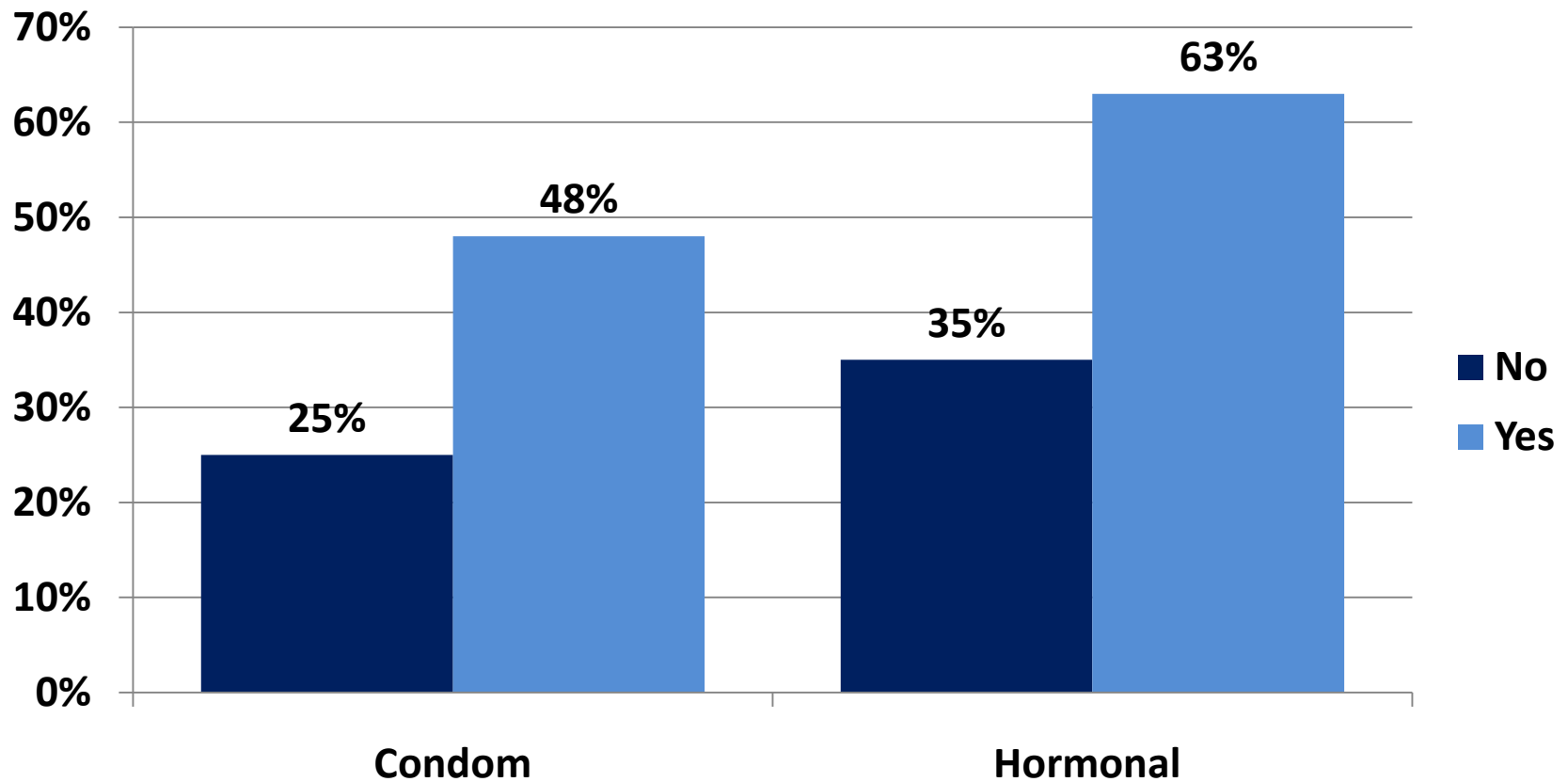
Emotional Power is Empowering

- **Emotional power shapes contraceptive behaviors**
 - Those with power have a say in their birth control use
- **Emotional power works differently for men/women**
 - When men have power, couples have less consistent contraceptive use & tend to use withdrawal
 - When women have power, couples have more consistent contraceptive use & tend to use condoms

Power Dynamics

Sasha (28) and Craig (29) have been dating and cohabiting for a little over a year in Sasha's house; it was his decision to move in. Though Sasha frequently complains about a lack of trust, respect, and commitment in the relationship, she also believes that she is in love with Craig, despite knowing that he is not in love with her. If they were to break up, Sasha would feel sad, while Craig would not miss anything about her. Though Sasha reports a desire to use condoms all the time, she admits that Craig has the final say about using birth control and that they used birth control less than half the time in the last month.

Female Reports Better Deal in Relationship



Pregnancy Intentions with Partner

- **Two groups of respondents within/across couples:**
 - One was adamant about not having children in the near future
 - Some did not see their partner fit to parent their child
 - Some had clear aspirations and goals for their future
 - The other was ambivalent about parenthood
 - They perceived their relationship to have low quality or they did not see their partner as fit to parent a child
 - BUT they desired to bond with their partner by having a child

“A Forever Bond”

“I’m trying to get her pregnant....for the bond. It will be...I mean I think we’ll be, in her mind we’ll be as one.”

- Sean, a 26-year-old male

“In the future, we’ve planned, that if we don’t make it in a relationship, because we’ve been friends for so long, we’re still going to have a child, and we probably won’t be together...I mean, the child is sort of like, our bond, because like I started off with him before I was even having sex, and then, you know, like, we went our separate ways, and it’s always just been something right there. So, like yeah, probably still have a kid, but not be together.”

- Destiny, a 28-year-old female

Discussion

- **Birth control use is shaped by relationship dynamics**
 - In particular “emotional power dynamics”
 - For women, having power may serve as a protective factor against unplanned, mistimed pregnancies
- **Couples exhibit inconsistent reports in birth control use and minimal communication**
 - Many are not discussing/making joint decisions about birth control
- **Some couples see childbearing as a way to bond with partners or to fulfill an emotional need**



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