



# African-American Couples' Contraceptive Behaviors: Relationship Dynamics and Decision-Making

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## Background

- **Unintended pregnancies in the U.S.**
  - Almost half of pregnancies are unintended
  - Racial/ethnic disparities exist
- **Contraceptive use is lower among minorities**

# Background

- **Individual and couple factors shape contraceptive use**
  - Individual birth control preferences and pregnancy intentions
  - Relationship dynamics
- **Relationship dynamics**
  - Emotional investment to the relationship relative to the other partner
  - Waller's Principle of Least Interest
    - Partner who is less emotionally invested on the relationship has more power than the partner who is more emotionally invested.

## Research Aims

- **Using qualitative research methods, this study sought to explore:**
  - Contraceptive behaviors of black unmarried couples
  - The role that relationship dynamics, specifically emotional investment may play in couples' birth control decision-making

## Sample

- **15 black couples; total 30 participants**
- **Recruited through:**
  - Programs, neighborhoods, flyers, and Craigslist
- **Study participants were limited to couples:**
  - Both partners were black
  - At least one partner was between the ages of 18-29
  - Couple was unmarried
  - In relationship for at least 3 months
  - Heterosexual and sexually active
  - Not planning a pregnancy within the next year

## Methods

- **Couples were interviewed concurrently with same-gendered interviewers**
- **IRB approval was obtained**
- **Inductive approach for data analysis:**
  - Interviews were summarized immediately after
  - Conducted a series of debriefings throughout the study period
  - Interviews were transcribed and coded using open, axial, and selective coding
  - Analysis was conducted at the individual and couple level using NVivo and SPSS

## Key Sample Characteristics

- **Income:** Vast majority of participants made under \$25,000 and half received public assistance
- **Education:** Half had a high school diploma or less
- **Relationship Status:** Vast majority of couples were in an exclusive relationship (dating or cohabiting)
- **Relationship Length:** Half had been dating for more than 2 years
- **Parenthood status:** Half of couples had children from previous relationships

# Findings



## Birth Control Use and Consistency

- **Withdrawal and condoms were the most common primary methods used**
  - 33% used withdrawal and an additional 20% used withdrawal with condoms
- **Hormonal methods were the least common methods used**
- **More than half of the couples were consistent users**
  - However, 40% reported inconsistent contraceptive use

## Relationship Dynamics: Emotional Investment to the Couple

- **Three groups of emotional investment were found**
  - 1) The male is more invested in the relationship  
(n = 4 couples)
  - 2) The female is more invested in the relationship  
(n = 4 couples)
  - 3) Both partners are equally emotionally invested  
(n = 7 couples)

## Sunny Outlook: If Only She Had More Time

- **When the male was more emotionally invested:**
  - He wanted a long-term commitment and
  - He had a more positive outlook on the relationship relative to his partner
  - She was less available to the relationship

***“I’m still not understanding some of the problems she is seeing. I know I would love to be with her. ....Often she fights me even though nothing is wrong. She makes problems up even though there aren’t any problems...she wants to spend less time together.”***

**- Montrell, 23, dating Jacinda for 1 year**

## Male is More Invested: Birth Control Use & Decision-Making

- **When the male was more invested:**
  - The female made the birth control decisions
    - The female decided to use hormonal methods or to stop using hormonal methods
  - Most were consistent in their contraceptive use

*“It was mostly my decision, ... He [Montrell] would rather have me be on it [the Ring], but he understands that I can’t have the hormones in my body all of the time. He feels a lot more comfortable when I’m on it [the Ring].”*

**-Jacinda, 22, dating Montrell for 1 year**

## I Want More of a Commitment from Him

- **When the female was more emotionally invested:**
  - She wanted a deeper commitment, often in the form of marriage
  - He had other individuals distracting him from the relationship
    - Either he currently had multiple partners or his children from previous relationships needed his time

## Female is More Invested: Birth Control Use & Decision-Making

- **When the female was more invested:**
  - The male made the birth control decisions
  - All of these couples relied on withdrawal
  - They were inconsistent in their use of withdrawal

## It is His Choice

**Aisha (23) and Bryan (26) have been dating for one year. For Aisha, this is the deepest relationship she has ever been in. Bryan is also invested in the relationship, but has 2 children from 2 previous relationships that often require his time. Aisha is not using hormonal birth control but she wanted to use other forms of birth control methods, including condoms. However, Bryan did not trust the effectiveness of condoms, fearing they would break frequently, and wanted to use withdrawal. Because Bryan did not trust condoms, Aisha and Bryan ended up relying on withdrawal.**

## Shared Emotional Investment: Birth Control Use & Decision-Making

- **When couples shared emotional investment they had similar:**
  - Emotional investment levels in the relationship
  - Perceptions of the health and future of their relationship
- **Birth control use and decisions among these couples**
  - They used birth control consistently and relied on more effective methods
  - In some of these couples, the female made the birth control decisions while in others, these decisions were made together
    - Birth control decisions were primarily influenced by their pregnancy intentions



## Shared Emotional Investment: Pregnancy Intentions & Birth Control Decision-Making

- **Couples with different pregnancy intentions:**
  - The female made the birth control decisions
    - She wanted to use birth control to avoid a pregnancy
    - She had a strong preference for a method (e.g. hormonal)
- **Couples who shared pregnancy intentions:**
  - Made joint birth control decisions because of common goal

***“We both just know that we need to take every precaution in preventing [Dionna] getting pregnant because...[that] would completely change our lives and we’re not ready for that.”***

-Shawn, 20, dating Dionna for 3-6 months

## Discussion

- **Consistent with Waller's *Principle of Least Interest***
  - The less emotionally invested partner has more influence over the couple's birth control use
- **Pregnancy intentions are important in birth control decision making among couples.**
- **Birth control experiences and preferences individuals bring into the relationship can shape the couples' birth control decisions.**
  - i.e. women's experiences with hormonal methods contributed to the couples' decision to use or not use hormonal methods
- **Personal and relationship level factors are important in couples' birth control behaviors**
- **Limitations of the study**
  - It included a relatively small sample of black and low-income couples drawn from a mid-Atlantic urban city
- **Exploratory to generate hypothesis**

## Discussion

- **Key hypotheses generated from this study**
  1. Partners less emotionally invested in the relationship are likely to decide the couples' birth control use
  2. When an emotional investment imbalance exists within a relationship, pregnancy intentions are likely to be associated with the couples' birth control use over and above their emotional investment.
  3. When women have a preferred method, they are likely to use it in their relationship if they:
    - are less emotionally invested in the relationship or
    - do not intend to have a pregnancy in the next year with their partner who shares similar levels of emotional investment.



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