Improving Quality of Life through contraception: Socio-economic impact

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The availability, during the second half of the XXth century, of modern contraception has caused a true social revolution with consequences that have continued to produce effects to the present day. To understand why we must speak of a revolution, indeed of a series of subsequent revolutions in reproduction, we need to adopt an evolutionary perspective, something that can only be done with the help of anthropology.

Another reason why we need to turn to anthropology is that only a broad perspective allows us to also grasp the full meaning of the uncertainty, occasionally bordering on hostility, that - at least in some countries - has surrounded all the most recent advances in reproductive technology.

Changing our understanding of the meanings of sexuality

Male reproductive strategy
Has been based on 2 simple mechanisms:
- Ensure continuity of an individual male through the passage of his genes to the largest feasible number of females;
- Select those females who would provide the highest possible quality of oocytes. This was usually achieved by selecting a young female with the best physical characteristics.

Female reproductive strategy
Female strategies have always focused around the need for protection and support. A human female, like the females of big apes, has - throughout most of the life span of the gender homo - sought a man capable of providing the best means for her survival and that of their offspring.
By and large, both these strategies have not differed from those utilized by big apes for whom sexual activity is fundamentally for reproductive purposes. Conceptive sexuality makes sense, because sexual behaviour is costly to both sexes. To save energies to be dedicated to food gathering, hunting, and defence was - in the early days - an imperative and a winning strategy.

Human reproductive strategies

Until recently, it was felt that conceptive sex was close to universal among wild animals; today exceptions are being discovered. There are documented cases among the big apes of occasional non conceptive sexual behaviour. In chimpanzees, sexual acts appear in play between infants and mothers, as well as between peers.

Human reproductive strategies

Infecund copulations seem singularly important in a species of chimpanzees, little known until the second part of the XXth century, called bonobos, living on the northern shore of the Congo river. With them, sexual behaviour begins to enter another dimension, so typical of sexuality in humans: cultural evolution. Sexual behaviour becomes a behaviour that can be learned and utilized for purposes other than reproduction.

Human reproductive strategies

This variety in sexual behaviour of the great apes is - in evolutionary terms - fascinating: can we call it “a prologue to the great variety observed in the sexual behaviour of humans”? For sure, humans must have practiced non-conceptive sex from the outset, judging from the unique features developed by our females.

Human reproductive strategies

A fundamental consequence of non-conceptive sexual activity and of the changes that “hid” the appearance of the fertile period and made human females accessible to the male throughout the cycle, is the need to avoid, rather than seek, conception during intercourse. Indeed, humans have tried to avoid pregnancy ever since they began to leave written records.
The search for methods to control fertility went on for millennia, but only found a valid solution during the XXth Century.

The twentieth century witnessed so many achievements in so many fields that it is virtually impossible today to predict which will be considered the most important by future generations. At the same time we can venture into speculating that only one event for ever changed the shape of humanity: the Population Explosion.

In my lifetime I have seen the birth of another two worlds - equal in numbers, needs, aspirations, hopes and dreams.

Egon Diczfalusy

Is there reason for optimism? History teaches us that, at the very time when a global problem cannot be ignored or delayed, humanity has in itself the capacity to confront it and find appropriate solutions.
The six billion threshold

16 June 1999
World Population Report 1996

12 October 1999
World Population Report 1998

Social impact of Contraception

These simple facts clearly indicate that, over the second half of the XXth century, a true social revolution took place. What is amazing is that, once started down this path, humanity seems to move so fast as to confuse its own members.

Revolutions in Reproduction

The contraceptive revolution has, for the first time, permitted sexuality without reproduction; this has been followed - after only 25 years - by the reproduction revolution, allowing childbearing without sexuality and almost immediately, by a third revolution: reproduction in menopause. A fourth revolution, cloning - that is reproduction without the 2 gametes - looms on the horizon.

Social impact of Contraception

“Theoretically, it would be one of the greatest triumphs of humanity if the act responsible for procreation could be raised to the level of voluntary and intentional behaviour in order to separate it from the imperative to satisfy a natural urge.”

Sigmund Freud, 1898
Wiener Klinische Rundschau, Vol II

Social impact of Contraception

The relative contributions of family planning programs and socio-economic development to fertility decline indicate that the relationships are complex, but that social and economic development and family planning service provision work together, and that both have independent effects in reducing fertility levels.
Social impact of Contraception

The World Fertility Report 2003 states that worldwide contraceptive utilisation passed from 38% in the seventies, to 52% in the nineties. In developing countries the increase has been from 27% to 40%; in ¼ of them this increase reached 62%.

Social impact of Contraception

Satisfying the unmet need for contraceptive services in developing countries would avert 52 million unintended pregnancies annually, which, in turn, would save more than 1.5 million lives and prevent 505,000 children from losing their mothers. The cost of providing contraceptive services to the 201 million women in developing countries with unmet need (those using traditional methods or no method) would be $3.9 billion per year. Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2005

Social impact of Contraception

Contraception and Induced Abortion

Social impact of Contraception

Figure 1: Trends in contraceptive use: modern and traditional methods in 107 developing countries, 1960-2002.
Social impact of Contraception

Contraception and sexually-transmitted diseases

The concerns and motivation underlying contraceptive behaviours in young women are different with different kinds of partners. In particular, women with one main partner perceive a low risk for STDs and their decision whether to use condoms is driven mostly by their concerns about pregnancy.....

(Oliva MA Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health 2002)

Social impact of Contraception

...... while a higher proportion of females with a casual partner report combined use of condoms and hormonal contraceptives.

(Oliva MA Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health 2002)

Social impact of Contraception

The US Department of Health and Human Services, recommends that sexually active adolescents use both condoms and hormonal contraceptives to prevent pregnancy and STDs. This has come to be known as the: "Dual method"

US Department of Health and Human Services, Healthy people 2010: understanding and improving health. 2000

Social impact of Contraception

Percentage of users of dual methods among adolescents in the USA

Cost of providing contraception

For the year 2000, UNFPA estimated that worldwide cost of providing family planning services was $10.2 billion (in 1993 dollars). Sixty-five percent of this cost ($6.6 billion) was for maintenance and improvements in the service delivery infrastructure, which would benefit all components of sexual and reproductive health care.
Cost of providing contraception

In addition, the cost of all other reproductive health programs undertaken as part of primary care was estimated to be $5.0 billion in 2000. And, HIV/AIDS prevention - consisting of mass media, school education and condom distribution efforts - cost an estimated $1.3 billion.33

Conclusions

The availability of modern contraception produced a major social revolution, the consequences of which have yet to be fully understood. What we can say is that it for ever influenced human development and changed our perspective on reproduction by separating its two main aims, the bond between man and woman and the creation of new lives.