Grandma's "Pill"

Whitney Mills

University of New Hampshire, Durham

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/perspectives

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholars.unh.edu/perspectives/vol5/iss1/1
Grandma’s “Pill”

Whitney Mills

ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative study that explores the experiences of women and the creation of the birth control pill. The study results from interviews with three women over the age of sixty-five, all of which were of reproductive age during the unveiling of the contraceptive pill in the United States. Results from the study suggest that the creation of the pill was an empowering historical event for womanhood in the United States. This paper explores the multifaceted freedom that the pill brought to women during the mid to late 20th century, and also suggests that the introduction of the contraceptive pill empowered women in a way that was generationally-unique and unknown by today’s typical young women. Results call attention to the controversies surrounding women’s reproductive health rights and their importance in modern day politics and life.

Following several years of war and economic depression, America during the late 1940s and early 1950s was characterized by domesticity and consumerism. Marriage rates during the 1950s were booming, and the age of newlyweds was lower than ever (Gazit 1999). By the time women were in their early twenties, they were expected to find a husband, settle down, and start a family. Under these societal pressures, women had little choice but to accept their domestic roles. By the mid-1950s, the life of the “happy homemaker” was a mainstream phenomenon. Enthusiastic-looking women could be seen in newspapers and storefront advertisements cooking, cleaning, and raising happy children. It was a trend that many women were part of. In fact, even women with newly acquired college degrees found themselves packing away their graduation robes and certificates to begin a life of cooking and sewing (Gazit 1999).

When the oral contraceptive known as “the Pill” was introduced in the late 1950s and eventually legalized in 1960, the role of American women changed forever. The focus of this research is to identify how women who were of reproductive age during the 1950s and 1960s view the creation of the birth control pill. This study explores the experiences of three women over the age of sixty-five and investigates the creation of the birth control pill as an empowering historical event for womanhood. I also consider how the introduction of the contraceptive pill empowered women in a way that was generationally-unique and unknown by today’s typical young woman. This paper will review the methods used to elicit these women’s experiences, provide an analysis and discussion of the interview data, and introduce implications of this research.

METHODS

To better understand the experiences of women with the creation of the birth control, I performed qualitative research featuring personal interviews. Three females participated in in-depth interviews, all of whom are ages sixty-five or older and self-identify as heterosexual.

Participant one, Mary, age 70, is originally from a small town in northern New Hampshire. She has been married twice and identifies as Protestant. Participant two, Sharon, age 70, is originally from a small town in south-central New Hampshire. She has been married only once and identifies as Catholic. Participant three, Audrey, is the youngest interviewee at age 65. She has been married once and eventually divorced. She differs from the former participants in age, as well as regional background. While the first two participants are from Northern New England, Audrey is a lifetime resident of Virginia. Therefore, her interview data adds regional diversity to the study. All three interview participants offer
unique perspectives to this study because they were of reproductive age when the birth control pill was first being developed and legalized. Their experiences reflect a historical event and its impact on personal, social, and economic spheres following the creation and development of the Pill in the late 1950s and 1960s. Prior to conducting the interviews, I developed an interview guide consisting of a few close-ended questions regarding demographic information, supplemented by approximately twenty open-ended questions covering a range of topics surrounding the creation of the birth control pill. These questions attempted to gauge the interviewees' personal views on the Pill, their perceived societal views, and how views on the birth control pill have changed over time. Outlining these themes ahead of time provided a loose structure that allowed conversation to flow, while also providing meaningful, purposeful direction throughout the interview.

The first two interviews took place in the participants' homes, both in south-central New Hampshire. These were face-to-face interviews which interviewees gave consent to audio recording. Notes were also taken during these interviews and were often used to devise follow-up questions. The interview with Mary lasted approximately 45 minutes, while the interview with Sharon lasted approximately 35 minutes.

The physical distance between the third participant and I meant we could not meet in person. Rather than participate in a face-to-face interview, Audrey's interview was completed through email. Because this method provided me with a written account of Audrey's experiences, I did not have to use an audio recorder. I did, however, take notes on her responses to my interview questions and used those notes to email her back a series of follow-up questions. This continued, back and forth, until I felt sufficient data was collected. All three interviews were largely based on eliciting social and human experiences from the participants, making the study phenomenological in nature. The human experiences and perspectives collected from the interviews were then coded and turned into workable data. With this data, themes were identified and used inductively to construct a theory to reflect these women's experiences and perspectives on the creation of the birth control pill.

FINDINGS

Birth Control and the Multifaceted Experience of Control

The benefits of reproductive control are multifaceted. Not only did the Pill enable women to plan their pregnancies, but it also offered control over economic stability and lifestyle management. I argue that the Pill supplied women with an increased range of control over their reproductive health which contributed to a shift in cultural attitudes surrounding a woman's societal role, and ultimately provided a sense of empowerment for women.

“Sex could be spontaneous” (Audrey): the birth control pill as reproductive control

During the 1950s and 1960s, pressure to rear children was alive and well. Sex was seen as a vital component to a healthy marriage, and without access to effective self-monitored contraception, women had very limited control over their reproductive health. For many women, thirty years of fertility meant thirty years of bearing and raising children. Reflecting upon this mandatory lifestyle, one participant asserts the following:

You couldn’t stop having children. Thirty years of childbirth was tough on women. After that many babies your body is very well depleted. (Sharon)

Essentially, women were forced into motherhood by biology and social mores with only two options: have sex and bear children, or abstain from sex in order to have control over childbirth. When the oral contraceptive known as “the Pill” was introduced in the late 1950s and eventually legalized in 1960, women
were finally able to have full control over their reproductive lives. The benefits of the creation of the birth control pill quickly became obvious. Women could have sex with their partners without the life-changing consequence of pregnancy; pregnancy could be controlled and even optional for single and married women across the United States.

**Planning**

The contraceptive pill is engineered to suppress ovulation to prevent pregnancy. With it, pregnancy can be planned or avoided altogether depending on each individual woman's needs and desires. In the first few years of its availability, the Pill enabled women to space out their children's births to their liking. Others chose to use the Pill in an effort to stop having children altogether (Asbell 1995:175). When asked about the reproductive benefits of the Pill, participants in my study emphasized the reproductive options it provided. Consider the following passage:

> For married women, it gave women the opportunity to have more control of their life and their body. For single women it gave them the opportunity to be more sexually active. And it even gave married women the opportunity to be more sexually active with their partner without the fear of pregnancy. (Mary)

While some women chose to use the Pill only after having children, others decided to use it to put off having children until the time was right. The concept of 'reproductive planning' had arrived, and women could easily see its advantages.

**Lifestyle**

The reproductive benefits of the birth control pill enabled benefits in other spheres of a woman's life. Largely, their lives were no longer dictated by their biology. As a result of this new-found reproductive control, women were able to personally choose a lifestyle to pursue. While some still may have been partial to the 1950s 'homemaker lifestyle', other women launched careers in the public workforce. Goldin and Katz (2002) support this notion, asserting that the introduction of the Pill altered women's career and marriage choices by virtually eliminating the risk of pregnancy. “Because up-front time intensive career investments are difficult for women with child care responsibilities, the pill encouraged women’s careers” (Goldin and Katz 2002:747).

Interviewees often described and personalized this process in their interviews. Audrey spoke at length about the career opportunities opened up to her by the Pill. She discussed how she dropped out of college to get married, and after having her first child, decided to get a prescription for the Pill. According to Audrey, this method of birth control allowed women to “more easily determine their direction and focus in life”, and as a result “allowed [her] more freedom to pursue success in [her] chosen career and to dedicate free time to only one child”. Audrey's choice to use this contraceptive device allowed her to pursue a professional career; without the Pill, this opportunity would not have existed for her.

**Economic Security**

For many American couples, the birth control pill also provided welcomed economic security. Though it is only a fraction of the 2012 rate, the U.S. Department of Agriculture records suggest that the cost of raising a child in New England in 1960 was approximately twenty-eight thousand dollars (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1971). For many young couples, the cost to raise one child, much less three or four, was already stretching their budgets thin. Access provided by the birth control pill translated into economic control—allowing couples to live within their means without fear or worry that they would not be able to support their family.
The economic benefits provided by the Pill were also uniquely important for a specific group of married women. Military wives spent much of the child-rearing years alone, unable to start a career because their husbands were not home enough to help care for the children. The Pill enabled these women to live without fear of pregnancy and without fear of economic instability. Two of the women included in this study were married to men in the service. Throughout their interviews, they frequently highlighted the importance of the Pill under the circumstances. Mary said,

I was dating [Phil] and most of that time he was in the service […] and, um, as far as [Phil] and I were concerned it wasn't the right time and we couldn't afford it. It never was the right time. It was a money thing.

Another participant, Sharon said the following:

[My husband] was in the service and we had to go to California […] we didn't feel that we were ready [to have children] so we decided that we wouldn't start.

For women with military husbands, preventing pregnancy was a logical and often necessary financial choice. And for women and men without military ties, control over reproduction was still crucial in ensuring economic stability. It enabled women to determine the timing and frequency of pregnancy, giving women and couples greater control over lifestyle, finances, and career development.

**Attitudes**

The benefits provided by reproductive control were unparalleled at this point in history. Following the creation of the birth control pill, attitudes about womanhood and sexuality were greatly challenged, marking the start of a cultural shift to accommodate the new, diverse roles of American women. Mary associates the birth control pill's benefit of reproductive control and its cultural repercussions with a sense of empowerment.

It empowered me. It let me have sex with my husband without anything to worry about. I didn't have a present husband for most of my married life, so it was not a time to be having more children. And I had no control over him being around, but I did have control over using the Pill. It was empowering.

Likewise, Audrey asserts that the effects of the birth control provided a “liberating” experience for American women.

Since women bore the primary child-rearing responsibilities, being able to singularly control contraception…not depending on men to use condoms…it was liberating I believe. Birth control pills provided highly effective insurance against more children and women could more easily determine their direction and focus in life.

These personal experiences indicate that reproductive control—as well as its cultural repercussions—contributed to a sense of empowerment for these women. With a reliable method of contraception, women were given a new degree of sexual, social, and professional freedom. At last, women were given the power to shape their lives according to individual wants and needs, not according to biology alone.
Change

Over fifty years after legalization, the Pill as an oral contraceptive has become the most widely prescribed medication for women between the ages of 18 and 44 in America (Rovner 2011). And while its basic functions of reproductive control and freedom remain the same, interview data highlights perceived differences between the status of the Pill in its early years and its status in modern day America. I argue that the Pill provides modern women with the same benefits of reproductive control that it did for women of the 1960s, but the meaning of those benefits may have changed over time.

Then and now: the birth control pill over time

The legalization of the Pill was welcomed by a generation of women who would eventually push women’s liberation to the forefront of the social stage. For these women of the 1960s, the Pill was one of the first wins in the long fight for women's rights. When asked to describe the connection between the Pill and the women's movement, Mary says,

…that was really an epic time in my life because it was the beginning of the women's movement. So…um…I can't tell you enough about, I can't tell you strongly enough about what an impact that had, the birth control pill had, as well as that whole movement, on changing the destiny of all women’s lives.

The connection that Mary describes between the birth control pill and the women's movement is not uncommon among women living through this period—access and use of the Pill was directly associated with the women's liberation movement (Gazit 1999). Interestingly, interview data indicates that use of the Pill was a fairly private matter for first and second generation users, despite its public influence on the women’s movement. For many, the decision to use the Pill was one made with a partner, or simply by oneself. And despite all interviewees asserting that the topic did occasionally come up between girlfriends, their use of the birth control pill was largely a private practice. One interviewee articulated the matter clearly, saying,

I never felt that discussing what I was going to do with my reproductive system was anyone else's business but mine and my husbands. It was more of a private matter at the time.

(Sharon)

This idea of privacy is a thread that runs through all three women's interviews in reference to birth control use during the 60s and 70s. Because use of the Pill was not accepted by all generations or subgroups of society, most women kept their use of contraceptives private or shared their use with a small network of girlfriends after starting the medication. These experiences clearly illustrate the women’s appreciation for the creation and legalization of the Pill.

Over fifty years later, the contraceptive pill is still widely available and used by American women. However, the interviewees were the first to point out that the status of the Pill and other women’s reproductive rights have changed over time. When asked to discuss these perceived changes, all three women referred to modern society as being more “accepting” of Pill use, and of abortions. One of the three participants asserted that modern society's acceptance of the Pill is due to society being so “sexualized”. Others perceived that it is a general openness among citizens that has led to more mainstream acceptance of contraception and woman's right to control her body. Mary says,
[Use of the Pill] is much more accepted today. I am not in touch with many young women today on the same level I was when I was young…but I would think that it is much more widely accepted now than it was when it first came out… I think it is probably a pretty commonly talked about thing.

Like so many other things, use of the Pill has undergone change with the rest of society. Yet while the freedom provided by the Pill remains the same, use of the oral contraceptive, as well as abortion, has become more socially acceptable.

These women's perspectives on modern day birth control use also suggest that young women today experience a detachment from the empowerment that the Pill provided women during the mid to late 1900s. Participants suggest that because young women today were not present during the legalization of the Pill and the greater women's liberation movement, it may be difficult for them to understand the progress that American women have made over the years. All research participants have a very rooted appreciation for the liberation provided by the Pill and the greater women's movement, but young, modern American women, much like myself, simply are not living in the heat of the women’s movement. Rather, we go to college, we vote, we expect equal pay, and we pick up our birth control prescriptions at the nearest pharmacy, all without thinking twice. These are rights that we almost 'take for granted'.

In this way, today's women reap the benefits of the hard work of a previous generation. With that said, access to the Pill is still a source of liberation for young women. Women today cannot understand the innate implications of the introduction of the Pill in the way that those of a previous generation can, simply because they did not 'live' it. This does not diminish the value of, or minimize the impact of the Pill's influence on young women's lives. It simply indicates that life is different than it was when the Pill was introduced. Explorations of this topic will help remind young women to appreciate the historical value that the Pill represents.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of fifty years, people's detachment from historical events is bound to occur. But does that detachment come with any dangers? Do we disrespect the women who fought for women's sexual freedom by not educating young women about the alternatives to or realities of reproductive control? And although I have been unable to find any prior research supporting this critical difference, interpretation of my interview data suggests that the differences in appreciation of the Pill are significant for these 1960s women.

The time for today’s women to do their share of the fighting has arrived. In the midst of the heated presidential election, women's issues have succeeded in taking the center stage. The focus on reproductive rights, including access to the birth control pill, has sparked a heated debate between presidential candidates. Efforts to impose government control on women’s health and reproductive decisions threaten to revert our country to a time when illegal abortions killed thousands of women, and birth control users were considered 'sluts'. Yet the truth remains that of the 62 million women of reproductive age in the United States of America, “virtually all of them will use a contraceptive method other than natural family planning at some point in their lives” (Jones and Drewke 2011:7). And in light of such national debate, this election demands the attention of all American women and men. In their most basic form, birth control and abortion are issues of women’s health and choice. Therefore, decisions regarding these rights will affect all women, regardless of political and religious beliefs. Interview data from three women who were of reproductive age in the 1960s makes a strong case for the liberation and empowerment provided by the creation of the birth control pill; “the Pill’s legacy to women is the belief in and the right to simple, safe and reliable contraception” (Watkins 1998:137). And in honor of these legacies, women will undoubtedly continue to take the Pill, regardless of the obstacles they may face in the years ahead.
REFERENCES


