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**The Impact of Natural Family Planning on Selected Aspects
of the Couple Relationship**

Thomasina Borkman and Mary Shivanandan

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The Impact of Natural Family Planning on Selected Aspects of the Couple Relationship

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Introduction

IN THIS paper, the impact of natural family planning (NFP) on certain aspects of couple relationships is considered. This paper is based on a secondary analysis of the same data set we had explored in a paper for the International Symposium on NFP in Los Angeles, June 1982. The source of our data was the interviews of teacher-users and NFP users conducted by Mary Shivanandan for her book, *Natural Sex*. The sample was limited to experienced and satisfied users.

In the first analysis, we looked at whether or not couples took joint responsibility for method-use and its relation to satisfaction with abstinence. We also explored a new way of conceptualizing "difficulty with abstinence." (Borkman & Shivanandan 1982)

In today's paper, we look in greater detail at NFP benefits often reported in testimonials, especially fertility awareness, communication, the sexual relationship, intimacy, and the religious/spiritual dimension.

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Few social science studies have examined in depth these reported benefits. Earlier studies (e.g., Marshall and Rowe 1970 and Tolor, Rice, and Lanctot 1975) generally began with the premise of abstinence as privation. They usually found natural methods to be generally acceptable despite difficulties with abstinence.

Sr. M. Peter McCusker in her M.S. nursing dissertation (1976) was the first to approach the subject "solely from the perceptions of the couples involved." Recognition of specific benefits began to emerge from answers to questionnaires mailed to 98 married couples who had used NFP for at least six months. As positive benefits, respondents listed, among other things, fertility awareness (19%), greater appreciation of spouse (12%), and moral or spiritual reasons (5%).

Robert Jonas, for his 1982 Ed.D. dissertation at Harvard Graduate School of Education ("Birth Control in a Culture of Changing Sex Roles—The NFP Experience"), studied a sample of 27 satisfied user-couples from 10 New England clinics associated with the Catholic Church. The couples had been using the method for at least six months. Largely a middle class sample, all but one couple were Catholic and most were involved in teaching or presenting NFP. With a sample very similar to ours, he looked at similar key areas: fertility awareness, joint responsibility, abstinence, and religious/spiritual beliefs. He also used similar methods of data collection, that is, open-ended questions during in-depth interviews. His findings will be referred to in the results section of this paper.

While several previous studies have noted the importance of religious affiliation in choosing natural methods, the earliest significant attempt to examine the religious dimension in greater depth was the study by Virginia Heffernan (1977). She used the sect-ecclesia typology to categorize the mainly Catholic couples. Contrary to her expectations, she found that those using NFP out of religious duty were not as satisfied as those for whom religious feelings are important. Jonas made a similar distinction which we shall use. He used the term "religious" to denote those beliefs identified with religious institutions and dogma. The term "spir-

itual" denoted those experiences of a more direct personal relationship to a transcendent spiritual reality.

Methods

The data for this exploratory research came from the in-depth interviews of 50 satisfied NFP couples. A systematic secondary analysis of these data was conducted using content analysis to develop the coding categories for each of the selected variables.

The sample of 50 NFP couples is drawn from three 1977 NFP conferences and from 12 NFP clinics. It is not a representative sample but one of convenience of NFP teacher-users and users who were available from the clinics and conferences. The three conferences were under Catholic auspices held in Virginia, Kansas City, and Los Angeles. The criterion for including a clinic for sampling was that it did not exclude anybody on the basis of ideology, religion, or marital status. The nine Catholic diocesan related NFP clinics were in Minnesota (2), Pennsylvania, Texas (2), New Mexico, New York, Washington, D.C., and Missouri. Three additional NFP clinics were non-Catholic: two federally-funded NFP clinics and the third an alternate religious life-style community in Summertown, Tennessee.

The 50 couples consisted of 25 teacher-users and 25 users. The teacher-users were older, median age 30-34 years, while users were in the median age group 25-29 years. Teacher-users had also used NFP longer than users, with a median of five years versus two years for users. The majority (92%) of all 50 couples were married, the remainder divorced or single. All were in sexually active relationships. The majority (75%) of teacher-users were Catholic whereas only 54% of users were Catholic; there was a spread of other religious faiths and those without religious affiliation. Four-fifths of both groups were white; there were two black couples, one Hispanic couple, and one racially mixed couple. The socioeconomic level was largely middle class with a few blue collar workers such as an air conditioning serviceman and an electrician. The majority of the men had professional or managerial occupations such as teacher, computer programmer, or insurance salesman.

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It must be emphasized that this is a selected group of NFP teacher-users and users. They had practiced it for two years or longer and were overwhelmingly satisfied with NFP.

Interviews had been tape recorded and then transcribed. Code categories were developed empirically from the data in all of the interviews. Then, after coding categories had been determined, the individual interviews were re-examined individually and coded in terms of the categories.

There were two types of variables considered in the analysis: (1) those about which the interviewer asked directly and (2) those that were spontaneously mentioned by users without probing or direct query by the interviewer. Issues mentioned without probing by the interviewer are regarded as being salient or significant to the interviewee since they are spontaneous. The disadvantage of spontaneous variables is that not all people in the sample mention them and there is a lower response rate to those items. The variables that were directly asked about in interviews were (1) satisfaction with abstinence, (2) attitude toward the sexual relationship in connection with abstinence, (3) joint responsibility for the use of the method, and (4) couple communication. The spontaneous variables to be examined in this paper are (1) the religious or spiritual and (2) fertility awareness.

Findings

In our first paper examining these data (Borkman & Shivanandan 1982), we looked at the association between whether or not couples took joint responsibility for using NFP as a measure of sexual equality and attitudes towards abstinence. We categorized people by their overall attitudes towards abstinence as positive 51% (N=33), mixed (45%), or negative. Interestingly, there was only one couple that was clearly negative in attitudes towards abstinence overall. The majority were positive and the remainder mixed.

There was a statistically significant relationship in the expected direction using chi square analysis: 93% of those with overall positive abstinence were also positive in joint responsibility in using NFP, while only 50% of those whose attitudes to absti-

nence were mixed or negative were positive in joint responsibility in using NFP. The association between the measure of joint responsibility and attitudes towards abstinence was confirmed in these data. We want to emphasize that one cannot know from this type of cross-sectioned data whether this is self-selection into NFP or whether there is something about a method of family planning requiring joint responsibility that helps people to become jointly responsible for its use. Future research will have to examine these possibilities.

In this paper, four variables—fertility awareness, communication, the sexual relationship, and religious/spiritual aspects—are examined.

Fertility Awareness

Fertility awareness was spontaneously mentioned by 58% of the couples. Jonas' definition of fertility awareness was used: "the awareness of cycle phase and any moods associated with it." We distinguished three different patterns of fertility awareness from the data: (1) knowledge of the woman's body and cycle, (2) both husband and wife feeling in tune with the cycle and being aware of hormone-related moods, and (3) respect beyond NFP for the personhood of the other, especially the woman.

Two examples of the first pattern (knowledge of the woman's body) follow. First, a teacher-user said, "When a woman becomes in touch with her body and what is happening, she says, 'I didn't know about this. This is absolutely fantastic.'" A second woman said, "After learning NFP, I got to know my body well."

In the second pattern, the couple become aware of hormone-related moods and feel "in tune." For example, one husband said, "I think I feel a little more in tune with my wife and in tune with the world. We are not fighting each other in terms of her cycle." A second example is a wife who said, "It is nice to be able to attribute certain things to the way my body is functioning as opposed to immaturity and moods."

In the third pattern (respect for the personhood of the other, especially to the woman), a husband volunteered, "My responsibility to my wife is to see she becomes everything she is capable

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Communication

On the variable, communication, specific questions were asked by the interviewer. From an analysis of the responses, we again distinguished three patterns: communication on (1) charts and symptoms, (2) the sexual relation, and (3) other areas than NFP. First, charts and symptoms provided a vehicle of communication. One couple responded, “We read NFP books together and talked about it. It is a big plus.” The second pattern, communication on sex, was mentioned by several couples:

We found ourselves talking more about sexual feelings. It is pleasurable.

We discuss sexual feelings. We learned basic physiology and sexual response. We started talking about sex and can even discuss it together before a large audience.

The third pattern is communication in areas other than NFP. One couple said, “NFP brought our marriage closer. We learned to communicate. We don’t have to use sex for everything.”

Sexual Relationship and Intimacy

Specific questions were also asked by the interviewer in the area of the sexual relationship. A positive attitude toward the sexual relationship is a feature of this sample of satisfied users. Of the couples interviewed, 28 were asked about their sexual relationship, and 26 (93%) answered the question in positive terms.

Direct questions about intimacy were not asked, but when couples responded to the question, “What do you do during the abstinence period?”, 32 couples mentioned intimacy or the lack of intimacy. Thirty couples (94%) gave spontaneous positive comments about intimacy.

The following are examples of satisfaction with sex and intimacy:

Sex is so fantastic . . . just being together in silence . . . it’s not how many times but what you bring to intercourse.

Sex has been getting much better. We are most passionate the first day of the infertile period. We both want each other more . . . the

experience of *not* having intercourse when we could conceive is incredible for both of us.

An example of one of the two negative responses is "Marriage doesn't solve sexual problems. Abstinence is difficult because there is no communication. My husband did not like to know about temperature."

Religious/Spiritual

Sixty percent of the sample spontaneously mentioned the religious/spiritual dimension. Among these comments, we found the same distinction as Jonas between those who practiced NFP solely from a moral or religious duty and those who mentioned a personal relationship with God or a connection with a life force in the universe.

In the "moral/religious duty" category, we have such comments from two Catholic couples as: "My religion is Catholic and it says 'no,'" or "We both had moral doubts on the Pill."

In the "spiritual" category, we find these comments in the data: "I'm more loving [during the fertile period] but would rather portray spiritual or divine love at that time . . . This is the time God created us to create. Sex came later. (no religious affiliation)

We had some kind of religious experience. Basically we had given over everything to God, and so we made a decision: Let's try this. We really had turned everything over to Him except that. (Catholic)

Each of these four factors, fertility awareness, communication, sex and intimacy, and the spiritual/religious dimension, were examined to see if teacher-users responded differently from users. Teacher-users who had practiced NFP an average of five years did not answer differently from users who had practiced an average of two years in these data.

Other Data Analysis

Two additional types of data analysis were performed. First, cross-tabulations of factors were made. Second, interviewees' responses were examined across all variables.

The factors, fertility awareness, communication, and religious/spiritual were cross-tabulated with each other and with satisfac-

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tion with abstinence, in order to see if there were statistical associations between the variables. No relationships among the variables were found in these data, but this may be due to the lack of variability and small numbers in our sample. Future research should re-examine these variables for possible relationships.

Secondly, when an individual's responses across all variables were examined, we identified at least two types of individual responses. There appears to be a consistent pattern across all variables for each couple. We are naming these (1) the physical or physiological and (2) the more psychological or relational.

In the first pattern, the physical or physiological, an individual mentioned only aspects of the variables associated with this basic aspect of NFP, for example, knowing bodily functions as an aspect of fertility awareness, charting and discussing charts for communication, caressing during abstinence for intimacy, choosing NFP for moral reasons for the religious/spiritual dimension.

In the second pattern, the relational or psychological, an individual or couple consistently mentioned a more complicated psychological or relational attitude towards NFP use than just the physical pattern described above, for example, being tuned into moods and respecting the woman's personhood as an aspect of fertility awareness, being more open and honest with each other for communication and having a feeling of closeness for intimacy, a personal relationship with a transcendental power as a response on the religious/spiritual dimension.

Conclusions

In conclusion, two issues will be mentioned. First, the cross-sectional data of this study do not allow one to identify if couples develop these benefits by practicing NFP or are pre-selected into the ranks of satisfied users: whether, for example, couples with good communication about sex just extend their communication as they practice NFP, or whether NFP helps them improve their communication on sex.

Second, even within a sample of satisfied users there are noticeable differences in patterns of response. Jonas suggested that

there are stages of religious/spiritual development, and that these stages constitute coherent world views that significantly affect the individual's reaction to the various components of NFP—fertility awareness, joint responsibility for its use, abstinence, as well as the amount and kind of benefits gained from NFP. Our findings are compatible with Jonas' notions. We suggest future research should consider this issue and look at the world views of couples when they first come to NFP and how their initial views affect the subsequent development of their NFP practice over time.

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