

ATTITUDES TOWARD CONTRACEPTIVE AND UTILIZATION AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

ATTITUDES FRENTE AO CONTRACEPTIVO E SUA UTILIZAÇÃO ENTRE ESTUDANTES UNIVERSITÁRIOS DA REPÚBLICA DOMINICANA

Miguel A. Pérez¹, Irene Rios², Aricel Pérez Navarro³.

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ABSTRACT

We investigated university students' attitudes and perceptions toward the use of contraceptives in the Dominican Republic using the Contraceptive Attitude Scale. This is a quantitative descriptive study designed to examine attitudes toward and use of contraceptives among university students in the Dominican Republic. Data were collected using the Contraceptive Attitude Scale from randomly selected University students at a medium sized university in the eastern part of the Dominican Republic. Findings from this study suggests gender differences related to perceived contraceptive use necessity, consequences, encouragement, and trouble with usage. Differences were also found based on years at the university in regard to feelings and reasons towards contraceptive use, and differences among ages with topics including contraceptive encouragement among friends and preference to use contraceptives. Findings suggest the need to improve social norms and perceptions about contraceptives as a strategy designed to increase use among university-aged students. Focusing on contraceptive and sexual education at the university level through peer educators, self-esteem building, and specific interventions with females could assist in improving the overall health of young adults in the Dominican Republic.

Descriptors: Contraceptives; Sexually transmitted diseases; Unwanted fertility; Young adult high-risk behavior; Attitudes.

RESUMO

Investigaram-se as atitudes e percepções de estudantes universitários com relação ao uso de métodos contraceptivos na República Dominicana, utilizando a Escala de Atitudes sobre Contraceptivos. Este é um estudo quantitativo descritivo desenhado para examinar atitudes relativas ao uso de contraceptivos e conhecer sua utilização entre estudantes universitários na República Dominicana. Os dados foram coletados usando a Escala de Atitudes sobre Contraceptivos entre estudantes universitários selecionados aleatoriamente em uma universidade de médio porte localizada na parte oriental da República Dominicana. As conclusões deste estudo sugerem diferenças entre os gêneros no que se refere à percepção da necessidade do uso de contraceptivos, às consequências do seu uso, ao seu encorajamento e a problemas com o uso. O número de anos na universidade (anos acadêmicos) também aparece associado a diferenças nos sentimentos e nas razões relacionadas ao uso de contraceptivos, e diferenças de idade estão associadas a questões como encorajamento ao uso entre pessoas amigas e preferências quanto ao tipo de contraceptivo. As conclusões sugerem a necessidade de se aprimorar as normas sociais e as percepções sobre contraceptivos a fim de aumentar o seu uso entre estudantes em idade universitária. A concentração do foco na educação sexual e no uso de contraceptivos entre universitários, recorrendo a educadores vistos pelos estudantes como seus pares, implantando medidas de reforço da autoestima dos estudantes e adotando intervenções específicas junto às mulheres são medidas que podem ajudar a melhorar a saúde geral de jovens adultos na República Dominicana.

Descritores: Métodos contraceptivos; Doenças sexualmente transmissíveis; Gravidez indesejada; Comportamento de alto risco entre jovens adultos; Atitudes.

REVISA

¹PhD, Department of Public Health. California State University. Fresno. United States of America.
mperez@csufresno.edu

² Department of Public Health. California State University. Fresno. United States of America.

³ Tesis Department. Universidad Central del Este. República Dominicana, Caribe.

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ORIGINAL

INTRODUÇÃO

The literature suggests that half of all new sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are reported among individuals 15-24, furthermore, the literature suggests that this population segment reports a high number of unintended pregnancies classifying young adults as a high risk population for these preventable conditions which can have a detrimental effect on their quality of life.¹⁻³ Several studies have suggested that contraceptives are an effective tool in decreasing unintended pregnancies as well as STIs.⁴⁻⁶ Research shows college student females report significantly higher knowledge of contraceptives and STIs compared to college student males⁷; however, little is known about factors leading to the use of or barriers to contraceptive use among young people in middle income countries such as the Dominican Republic (DR).

Few studies have been conducted among Dominican adolescents related to their attitudes, knowledge, and behaviors regarding contraceptive use. In fact, what little we know can be extrapolated from studies related to HIV and STIs in the DR. Sikkema et al. studied HIV risk behavior among Dominican adolescents in the U.S. compared to the DR and found a positive relationship between self-esteem and condom use. The researchers also reported higher self-esteem among Dominican adolescents living in the U.S. compared to those in the DR leading to higher rates of contraceptive use among those residing in the US mainland. Based on their results, the researchers suggested that sex education should be combined with self-esteem building activities designed to strengthen safer sex practices, create peer norms that support condom use, promote condom negotiation skills, and remind youth of the risks associated with lowered inhibitions.⁸

Several factors have been identified as barriers to contraceptive use among Dominican youth. In a study of Dominican college students, Patsdaughter et al found that the discussion of sexual activity and contraceptive use remains a taboo in their culture.⁹ The researchers⁹ found that only about half of their sample population had discussed HIV and STIs with a parent, an adult or recall having learned about these issues in school. The researchers also found that less than half of the adolescents between the ages of 12-18 in their sample had used a condom during their last intercourse. A more recent study explains how lack of information about contraceptives affects the quality of life of Dominican adolescents especially young women.¹⁰ In a study of Dominican women in the island, the researchers found that it was not perceived access to contraceptives that affected their use, but rather male partner influence and high personal reproductive choices. Other researchers have found differences in knowledge and attitudes toward contraceptives among Dominicans based on their residence, with US based populations reporting greater access to contraceptives and more positive attitudes toward their use.¹¹

The purpose of this study was to examine college students' attitudes toward the use of contraceptives in the Dominican Republic.

METHOD

Data for this study, which used a cohort quantitative descriptive design, were collected from 300 students in a mid-sized university in the Dominican Republic using the validated Contraceptive Attitude Scale (CAS). The CAS consists of 32 (16 positively worded, 16 negatively worded) questions involving personal contraceptive use history, attitudes, feelings, and encouragement towards using contraceptives, and frequency of use. Demographic questions were added to gather more information about the participating population. The

CAS was originally developed for use among US based student populations, however, it has also been used in other countries.¹²⁻¹⁵

The CAS was translated from English to Spanish and back translated from Spanish to English by fully bilingual and bicultural individuals residing both in the US and in the Dominican Republic. The instrument's face validity was established by having the Spanish version of the instrument evaluated by three persons in the Dominican Republic who reviewed it for content and language; they suggested minor modifications to the instrument including some vernacular vocabulary.

Procedure

After obtaining IRB approval from both institutions, surveys were distributed in randomly selected courses providing a representative sample of the University's student population. Instructors were asked to participate and the research team explained the study to the participants and provided informed consent forms to be included in the sample. Those willing to participate completed the questionnaire and returned them to the research assistants present in the classrooms. A response rate of 98% was attained in this study.

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS v 21) program for analysis. Positively worded questions were then reversed scored so that the data analysis would be completed. Measures of central tendency were used to analyze demographic data while ANOVA tests were conducted on the categorical data to analyze differences between gender, age, and year in school. Chi Square was used to further analyze differences among the gender, age, and year in school variables and related statements.

RESULTS

Demographic characteristics of the sample in this study are presented in Table 1. The majority of sample participants were female (55%), between the ages of 18-21 (73%), and held positive attitudes toward their academic skills (99.6%).

Table 1- Sample Demographic Characteristics. Dominican Republic.

Demographics	Response Rate	Total
Gender		293
Female	55%	162
Male	45%	131
Age		294
18	14%	41
19	16%	46
20	19%	57
21	24%	70
22	12%	34
23	6%	18
24+	9%	28
Year at University		292
First	27%	80
Second	22%	63
Third	34%	99
Fourth	17%	50
Ethnicity		289
Blanco	13%	37
Mestizo	57%	164
Negro	18%	52

Indigena	8%	24
Other	4%	12
Personal Academic Perception		291
One of the best	51.5%	150
Average	48.1%	140
One of the worst	0.34%	1

Table 2 shows statistical differences in responses based on age. The data show differences in encouraging friends to use contraceptives with older students (23 and older) being more likely to encourage their friends to use contraceptives. Similar findings were reported by better sensation (pleasure) with 22 year olds being more likely to agree that contraceptives bring more pleasure during intercourse. Interestingly, 19 year olds and those over 21 were more likely to disagree with the statement "Using contraceptives makes a relationship seem too permanent." Finally, 23 year olds are more likely to disagree that contraceptives encourage promiscuity.

Table 2- Statistical Differences Based on Contraceptive Attitudes and Behaviors. Dominican Republic.

Statements	Statistical Sig.	Confidence Intervals	
Age		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
I encourage my friends to use contraceptives	0.002	2.23	2.57
Contraceptives can actually make intercourse seem more pleasurable	0.033	2.79	3.10
I prefer to use contraceptives during intercourse	0.011	2.09	2.42
Using contraceptives makes a relationship seem too permanent	0.022	3.24	3.53
Contraceptives encourage promiscuity	0.017	3.29	3.61
Gender			
Using contraceptives is much more desirable than having an abortion	0.003	1.80	2.14
I encourage my friends to use contraceptives	0.042	2.23	2.56
Contraceptives are not really necessary unless a couple has engaged in intercourse more than once	0.014	3.67	3.97
It is no trouble to use contraceptives	0.018	1.89	2.19
Year of University			
Using contraceptives is much more desirable than having an abortion	0.039	1.81	2.15
One should use contraceptives regardless of how long one has known his/her sexual partner	0.014	2.35	2.70
I feel more relaxed during intercourse if a contraceptive method is used	0.004	2.04	2.35
In the future, I plan to use contraceptives any time I have intercourse	0.030	2.41	2.74
It is no trouble to use contraceptives	0.043	1.91	2.21

More females (79%) were likely to agree or strongly agree with the

statement “Using contraceptives is much more desirable than having an abortion,” encouraging friends to use contraceptives (67% females and 56% males), however, more males (25%) than females (12%) were likely to agree or strongly agree with the statement “Contraceptives are not really necessary unless a couple has engaged in intercourse more than once). Males were also more likely than females (74% vs. 67% respectively) to believe on the ease of use of contraceptives. Statistical differences were also found among first, second, third, and fourth year university students with the following survey responses: desirability of using contraceptives versus an abortion, the use of contraceptives regardless of relationship duration, having a peace of mind while using contraceptive, future use of contraceptives, and ease of using contraceptives.

Table 3 displays the differences among university year and related statements. Fourth year students are more likely to agree with contraceptives being more desirable than having an abortion, believe one should use contraceptives regardless of how long one has known his/her partner, and are more likely to use contraceptives in the future. Third year students are more likely to feel relaxed during intercourse if contraception is being use. First year students are more likely to agree that it is no trouble to use contraception.

Table 3- Statements with Differences Among Year At The University. Dominican Republic.

	First Year		Second Year		Third Year		Fourth Year	
	Agree/Strongly Agree	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	Agree/Strongly Agree	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	Agree/Strongly Agree	Disagree/Strongly Disagree	Agree/Strongly Agree	Disagree/Strongly Disagree
Using contraceptives is much more desirable than having an abortion	70%	25%	78%	17%	76%	18%	84%	14%
One should use contraceptives regardless of how long one has known his/her sexual partner	40%	34%	57%	32%	61%	21%	62%	30%
I feel more relaxed during intercourse if a contraceptive method is used	63%	16%	65%	14%	70%	12%	60%	30%
In the future, I plan to use contraceptives any time I have intercourse	45%	33%	43%	24%	53%	20%	54%	32%
It is no trouble to use contraceptives	75%	16%	71%	16%	54%	32%	60%	22%

*Percentages were calculated by the proportion of students who agreed or disagreed within the same year at the university category so that they may be comparable across the board. Undecided responses were not included.

DISCUSSION

Results from the study suggest participants had a positive perception towards contraceptive use and were likely to use them provided they were available. In fact, finding from the study suggest that contraceptive accessibility is only one of many factors that may influence a university

student's decision to use contraception. Other factors include gender, attitudes, and length of relationship.

Results from the study suggest inconsistent contraceptive use – especially barrier methods – in the part of males, and in this regard our findings are similar to that of other researchers who have reported similar results.^{10,15-16} This reluctance to consistent use of barrier methods can lead to unintended consequences including infections with an STI and a potential unintended pregnancy. Male reluctance to use contraceptives consistently may also be a reflection that it is their partners who are more likely to get pregnant and face the choice of either bringing a life into the world without a partner or to engage in an unsafe abortion since this last option continues to be illegal in the Dominican Republic.¹⁷ Since an unsafe abortion would naturally be less desirable for women the use of any form of contraceptive may be more palatable to females.

Different stages of maturity among college aged students may be a factor in determining contraceptive use. Study results showed a more positive perception and likelihood to use contraception among third and fourth year students. The literature shows age is a factor that influences contraceptive use consistency among Dominican adolescents and young people since 15-24 year olds are at a greater risk of discontinuing consistent and continuous contraceptive use.¹⁸ The literature also suggests that increased sexual behavior results in a more consistent use of contraceptives.¹⁹

While the study did not seek to make distinctions between chemical and barrier contraceptive methods, study participants reported positive perceptions related to enhanced sensation while using a contraceptive method. Participants agreed or strongly agreed with statements of feeling more relaxed when using any contraceptive method and suggested that their use can actually make intercourse seem more pleasurable leading to a use during intercourse. A previous study found that 65% of American and Dominican Republic participants claimed “they would definitely wear a condom on their next sexual encounter,” but Dominican students reported the main reason for not wearing a condom is due to a decrease in sexual pleasure.¹⁶ Our findings indicate the conditions under which college students residing in the island are likely to use contraceptives.

In 2004, the Dominican Republic Secretary of State for Public Health and Social Assistance first published the National Public Health Norms for Reproductive Health standards and protocols for contraceptive availability, family planning, and young adult prevention programs.²⁰ Although this was a significant step in improving the country's reproductive health, there is little evidence that those recommendations were included into school based curriculums. While this lack of action may be attributable to conservatism in the country, lesson can be learned from Guatemala, a religiously conservative and male dominant country, that focuses on contraceptive education and counseling to post abortive women in public hospitals. The evidence suggests that education, counseling, and training of proper use of contraceptives we can increase their consistent use and also adhere to the nation's reproductive health program through the Social Development Act.²¹ This step is of vital importance given the large proportion of respondents who indicated they had limited discussions regarding contraceptives either at home or at the school.

Findings from this study suggest a need to focus on education at the university level involving proper contraceptive use and benefits to improve the differences among gender, age, and university year in using contraception. Self-esteem building approaches can also be used to assist with peer pressure and encourage friends to use contraceptives since there is a “positive correlation between self-esteem and condom use”.²² Utilizing peer support could be a more effective way of providing contraceptive education.

Universities may want to develop a system of peer educators due to research showing a better response to friends. It would be beneficial to focus education on women (such as the interventions in Pakistan and Guatemala) specifically since research shows women may be more receptive than men to avoid unplanned pregnancies and abortions. Educating males to work on feeling more comfortable with discussing and encouraging friends to use contraception could improve the perception of contraceptive use. Making a larger effort to implement sexual education at the university level could be beneficial to the overall health of young adults in the Dominican Republic.

CONCLUSION

Finally, the Dominican Republic could benefit from setting national reproductive health goals which specifically target adolescents and young adults in topics related to pregnancy planning, unintended pregnancy prevention, and promote healthy sexual behaviors while improving access to services to prevent STIs. This national plan could be developed in conjunction with many segments of society and would go a long way in changing negative attitudes toward contraceptives and increase their use among Dominican young people.

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