
Psychological and Social Effects of Abortion— Some Recent Data

by Sara Karkkainen Terian

Considerable amounts of research have been carried out attempting to assess the psychological effects of abortion on women. Many of these studies report data to prove the absence of harmful effects.¹ However, studies on women's self-reported responses to abortion show conflicting evidence, or perhaps more accurately, are used to prove contradictory points, since obviously both positive and negative reactions are present.

Personal Responses

One study involving mostly married women shows that more than 50 percent felt relieved after abortion; negative responses were reported by less than 20 percent. According to this report, during the months after the abortion, women were increasingly satisfied with their decision, viewing it in "increasingly positive terms with the passage of time."² Another study of unmarried adolescents reports that more than 80 percent of the subjects would make the same decision again, whether that decision was abortion, single motherhood, or marriage. Among those who chose to abort, a positive attitude toward abortion in general, consistent

contraceptive use following abortion, and mother's higher educational attainment accounted for about 20 percent of the variance in satisfaction.³ In more than one study, family support has been found to be crucial.⁴ Obviously, married women had it in the context of their own nuclear families, whereas adolescents would need to receive it from their families of orientation.

However, a high number of women have admitted to having notable psychological problems after abortion. Some have experienced emotional and behavioral symptoms similar to "post-combat stress reactions" of soldiers returning from war.⁵ Others have had symptoms similar to the grief experienced after involuntary loss of an infant, and for many this grief reaction began with the decision to terminate the pregnancy.⁶ In many cases, nightmares, depression, and other kinds of trauma are experienced by the women for years—periods as long as 12 years have been reported. Often the trauma emerges many years after the event, sometimes with the arrival of subsequent children.

Sometimes women may not consciously acknowledge such trauma for many years; as one young woman said, "I threw myself into my studies. . . . From the outside, you'd never guess how it hurt me."⁷ It is doubtful that such hidden hurts will be reported accurately in quantitative studies in which the subjects often respond in socially acceptable ways. Justification of one's decision is also to be expected, which would explain some of the contradicting findings re-

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ported above.

In addition to the mother, the decision about a pregnancy directly concerns other individuals. The most obvious, of course, is the biological father. Although men's attitudes toward abortion are generally more liberal than women's, disputes between couples in which the man wants the fetus to be carried to term are not uncommon.⁸ Men's

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interest in pregnancies that women may define as unwanted has not received much attention. There are indications that men involved in the abortion experience also have psychological and emotional stress. In about half of the 1.5 million annual abortions in the United States, the women are accompanied by their male partners, but clinics extend no assistance to the men who often feel totally shut out.⁹ From time to time, the news media reports cases of dispute between a man and a woman whose mutual offspring is on the way. Pro-abortion feminists usually welcome the woman's victory in such cases.¹⁰ However, as some writers have noted, it would seem reasonable that biological fathers who oppose the abortion should have their rights weighed against the mother's rights.¹¹ Against the feminist argument it can be said that one wrong cannot be made right by another wrong; it is true that women have been discriminated against, but reverse discrimination cannot solve the problem.

Social Issues

Much depends on whether abortion is viewed as "a personal trouble of milieu" or as a "public issue of social structure."¹² Evidence is not conclusive enough to squarely

place the problem on one side or the other; elements of both appear to be present, and perhaps in a different fashion than expected. Some data, however, suggest placing it more on the "issue" side.¹³ One study found that among younger adolescents (under age 15), almost half of the abortions occur among minority youths, especially the disadvantaged groups. This, and its frequency among adolescents in general, led the American Psychological Association's Interdivisional Committee on Adolescent Abortion to define it as a social phenomenon.¹⁴ Another study reexamined previous findings that showed abortion to be most prevalent among unmarried white women. Controlling for certain factors, such as increased accessibility—whether geographical or financial—revealed that blacks are more likely to abort than whites, and that variance between married and unmarried women is smaller than among whites. The odds of black married women aborting rather than giving birth are 2.8 times higher than the odds for white married women. However, unmarried black women are somewhat less likely to obtain an abortion than give birth, whereas white women are far more likely to obtain an abortion.¹⁵

These data are suggestive of socio-economic considerations. Perhaps the established fact of absentee fathers in black families leads married black women to resort to abortion more often than white women who generally have more support from their husbands. In the case of unmarried black women, it has been suggested that welfare payments might provide an incentive to carry the baby to term.¹⁶ A study in New York in 1975 showed that abortions were not related to welfare status, but a study in California in 1976 showed that girls who receive state aid are more likely to carry their babies to term and remain unmarried. Those teenagers who place greater value than others on time and better grades, and those women who are self-supporting were more likely to choose abortion.¹⁷ The prevalent definition of abortion as a method of birth control obviously colors those decisions. In fact, many consider abortions "not fundamentally different from other conventional goods and services."¹⁸

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Gary Melton and Nancy Felipe Russo, "Adolescent Abortion: Psychological Perspectives on Public Policy," *American Psychologist* 42 (January 1987), pp. 69-72, assert that vulnerability to psychological harm from abortion is not supported by data, citing N. E. Adler and P. Dolcini, "Psychological Issues in Abortion for Adolescents," in G. B. Melton, ed. *Adolescent Abortion: Psychological and Legal Issues* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), pp. 74-95. This book contains the full report of the American Psychological Association's Interdivisional Committee on Adolescent Abortion.
2. George M. Burnell and Mary Ann Norfleet, "Women's Self-reported Responses to Abortion," *The Journal of Psychology* 121 (January 1987), pp. 71-76. This study surveyed 300 members of a prepaid health plan who had therapeutic abortions (randomly selected from 626). More than 50 percent of the subjects were married, and 44 percent were 30 years old or older.
3. Marvin Eisen and Gail L. Zellman, "Factors Predicting Pregnancy Resolution Decision Satisfaction of Unmarried Adolescents," *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* 145 (December 1984), pp. 231-239. The subjects were interviewed six months after delivery or abortion.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 237, reports that single mothers were more likely to be satisfied if they received support from their own mothers for their decision to become a single mother. Another study by Carmen G. Ortiz and Ena Vazquez Nuttall, "Adolescent Pregnancy: Effects of Family Support, Education, and Religion on the Decision to Carry or Terminate Among Puerto Rican Teenagers," *Adolescence* 22 (Winter 1987), pp. 897-917, found that those who decided to carry their babies to term had closer relationships with their mothers and more support from their families.
5. Anne Speckhard, *Psycho-social Stress Following Abortion* (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed and Ward, 1987). This book reports a study of 30 women with such experiences.
6. Larry G. Peppers, "Grief and Elective Abortion: Breaking the Emotional Bond?" *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 18:1, (1987-1988), pp. 1-12.
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9. "Men and Abortion," *Futurist*, 19 (April 1985), pp. 60-62, commenting on Arthur B. Shostak and Gary McLouth with Lynn Seng, *Men and Abortion: Lessons, Losses, and Love* (New York: Praeger, 1984).
10. "Holding a Baby" [a column], *Economist* 302 (February 28, 1987), p. 74.
11. Tushnet and Seidman, "Comment on Tooley's Abortion and Infanticide," 352.
12. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 8.
13. See Theda Skocpol, ed., review symposium, "A Social Issue in American Politics: Reflections on Kristin Luker's Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood," *Politics and Society*, 15 (2: 1986-1987), pp. 189-234.
14. Interdivisional Committee, "Adolescent Abortion," p. 73.
15. Powell-Griner and Trent, "Sociodemographic Determinants," pp. 557-559.
16. Mikhail Bernstam and Peter Swan, "Production of Children as Claims on the State: A Comprehensive Labor Market Approach to Illegitimacy in the United States, 1960-1980." Hoover Institution, 1986. According to Medoff (note 83), this study contends that AFDC is an incentive for poor women to have children and thus to be subsidized relative to rich women.
17. Arleen Leibowitz, Marvin Eisen, and Winson K. Chow, "An Economic Model of Teenage Pregnancy Decision-making," *Demography*, 23 (February 1986), pp. 67-77.
18. Marshall H. Medoff, "An Economic Analysis of the Demand for Abortions," *Economics Inquiry*, 26 (April 1988), p. 354.