

Psychological Effects of Abortion and Attitudes toward Reproductive Rights

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to not only investigate if having an abortion affects women psychologically, but to see if factors such as religious background, parental influence, political affiliation, and sexual orientation play a role in determining how individuals view abortion procedures as a reproductive choice. To obtain our results, we created an internet questionnaire containing 35 questions divided into four different sections: demographic questions, a section for men only, a section for women who have not had an abortion, and a section for women who have had an abortion which included several questions from the Impact of Event Scale as modified from Horowitz, Wilner, and Alvarez (1979). The initial analysis indicates that, of the individuals who participated in the survey, the majority has a pro-choice view and is supportive of women's reproductive rights. Our results also portray that religion, political affiliation, sexual orientation, and parents' opinion may influence viewpoints regarding abortion.

Although abortions are legal during specific times in a woman's pregnancy since Roe versus Wade decision in 1973 by Supreme Court in the United States of America, women are still frequently denied adequate reproductive rights in reality. Many believe that restricting laws at the state level on the necessary medical procedure is illogical, condescending, and oppressive. On the other hand, most media tend to portray abortion procedures as murder and tend to show more "pro-life" propaganda than pro-choice. There are two main sides to this issue: pro-life and pro-choice; although, some individuals may support abortion only during certain circumstances such as rape or incest.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the situational contexts of the people who either support or disagree with abortion in order to see if religious background or the beliefs of the participants' parents, as well as the individuals' political affiliations or sexual orientations, play a role in determining whether or not they support abortion procedures. We examined if they were religious, how frequently they practiced their religion, if they were raised in a religious household, and their parents' opinions about abortion as a reproductive choice. We also explored the psychological effects the procedure had on women who have had an abortion.

Methods

Participants

Our sample consisted of 576 participants ranging from ages less than 18 to 50 or older: 51 males, 517 females, and 4 transgender individuals. Of these participants, 57 were less than 18, 464 were 18-29, 24 were 30-39, 17 were 40-49, and 10 were 50 or older. Individuals from all over the world participated in our survey. Of the individuals who completed the survey, 250 were atheists or agnostics, 206 Christian, and 110 practice other religions. The survey was posted on the social networking website, Facebook, and to blogs on the website tumblr.com. Also, 6 upper and lower level psychology and sociology classes in a public university in a southern USA state were given extra credit points to participate in the survey.

Procedure

To obtain our results, we created an internet questionnaire containing 35 questions. The survey includes four different sections: demographic questions, a section for men only, a section for women who have not had an abortion, and a section for women who have had an abortion which included several questions from the Impact of Event Scale as modified from Horowitz, Wilner, and Alvarez (1979).

Results

Religious Background and Support of Abortion

As mentioned before, the results clearly show the diversity of the religions among the participants. The percentages for the participants in each religion are as follows: 43.4% atheist/ agnostic, 35.8% Christian, and 19.1% other. First of all, our results show there is a statistical significance regarding religion and attitude toward abortion. Atheists/ agnostics were more likely than Christians to indicate that they believed abortion should be a reproductive choice. The religion the participants' practiced had a strong relationship ($v=0.519$) with their belief about abortion. Further regarding religion, we also investigated how frequently the participants practiced their religion and examined how this correlated with their opinions of abortion. Of the individuals who answered that section of the survey, 100% of the individuals who said they never practiced their religion said they believed abortion should be a reproductive option whereas only 70% of the participants that said they practiced their religion daily agreed that abortion should be an option.

Parental Influence and Support of Abortion

In regards to parents' influence on the participants, of the individuals who had parents who supported abortion, 89% supported abortion themselves whereas with the ones who had parents who did not support abortion, only 50% supported it themselves. The results show that parental influence had a strong effect ($p=0.528$) on support of abortion as reproductive choice. In addition to parental influence, we investigated the effects of being raised in a religious household. Our results show that 89% of individuals who were not raised in a religious household support abortion whereas only 60% of those who were raised in a religious household support abortions as a reproductive choice. Growing up in a religious household had a moderate effect ($v=0.287$) on the participants' opinions of abortion as a reproductive choice, but it was not as great as that of the influence of their parents' opinions.

Political Affiliation and Support of Abortion

Like with religion, the results show a strong relationship ($p=0.703$) between political affiliation and support of abortion as a reproductive option. Regarding support of abortion, liberals were significantly more likely than conservatives to indicate they believed abortion should be a choice: 98% of those who said they were liberal said they supported abortion, whereas on 40% of conservatives answered that they believed abortion should be an option.

Sexual Orientation and Support of Abortion

In regards to sexual orientation, our results indicate that 69.4% of the individuals that took the survey are heterosexual and 29.5% are LGBTQ individuals. Of the heterosexuals that participated in the survey, 83% indicated that they supported a woman's right to choose whereas 99% of the LGBTQ individuals said they supported abortion as a reproductive choice. The results show a moderate relationship ($p=-.241$) between sexual orientation and support for abortion.

Psychological Effects of Abortion

We selected 11 items from the Impact of Events Scale to assess how the women who had an abortion were affected psychologically. The majority of the women indicated that they did not suffer from anxiety or regrets from their decision to have an abortion. Many indicated that they actually wanted to talk about it, and the majority of participants said that they never had dreams about it nor did they have reoccurring images of the procedure.

Discussion

Although there are variations among LGBTQ community in regard to abortion rights, most LGBTQ individuals share values of gender equity, gender equality, and reproductive autonomy.

When they identify themselves as members in LGBTQ community, they have made conscious effort in thinking about issues of rights (e.g., human rights and women's rights) and see a common front in fighting for autonomy, rights, and freedom with feminist organizations and they may see it as their own cause. So it's not surprising that this study finds that LGBTQ group as a minority in sexual orientation is more supportive of pro-choice ideology than the general public.

This study provided support to previous research (Adler et al, 1992; Zolese & Blacker, 1992) that the majority of evidence from scientific studies indicates that most women who undergo abortion have very few psychological side effects later on and most women report that their primary reaction following an abortion is relief (David & Lee, 2001; Russo, 2008). Though there are individual differences in emotional reaction after abortion, most women who had an abortion do not suffer any long-term effects, such as problems with depression, anxiety, or self-esteem (Lee, 2003; Russo, 2008).

Future Considerations

Given the sample size of our data and the extensiveness of our survey, many studies can be derived from the results. In the future, we may consider focusing on factors such as geographical location and ethnicity.

Also, we can focus more on the reasons for the participants' beliefs about abortion and further analyze them with certain factors such as religion and political affiliation. Regarding this study's focus on religion and parental influence, we may yield better results if we examine the closeness of the relationship between the participants and each of their parents. Also, our hypothesis would be better supported if we knew exactly what religion the participants were raised to practice.

All in all, a relatively small amount of research has been conducted in support of the pro-choice movement. Therefore, it is essential for research to be done in this area of study because without evidence to support pro-choice views, women are unlikely to gain the full rights to their bodies. Women struggle during the trying time of an unplanned pregnancy and they receive little to no support from our government and society. If more studies like this one were conducted to debunk the anti-choice falsehoods that are promoted in the media, the stigma associated with abortion procedures may lessen dramatically.

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Appendix

Tables 1& 2: BelieveCat * Religion_RecodeCrosstabulation

Count

		religion_recode			Total
		Atheist/agnostic	Christian	other	
BelieveCat	yes	226	85	89	400
	no	1	49	1	51
Total		227	134	90	451

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.519	.000
	Cramer's V	.519	.000
N of Valid Cases		451	

Tables 3&4: BelieveCat * PoliticCatCrosstabulation

Count

		PoliticCat		Total
		Liberal	conservative	
BelieveCat	yes	294	16	310
	no	3	24	27
Total		297	40	337

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.703	.000
	Cramer's V	.703	.000
N of Valid Cases		337	

Tables 5&6: BelieveCat * ReligHouseCatCrosstabulation

Count

		ReligHouseCat		Total
		yes	no	
BelieveCat	yes	118	155	273
	no	38	7	45
Total		156	162	318

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	-.287	.000
	Cramer's V	.287	.000
N of Valid Cases		318	

Table 7&8: BelieveCat * parbeliefcat Crosstabulation

Count		Parbeliefcat		Total
		yes	no	
BelieveCat	yes	247	68	315
	no	1	40	41
Total		248	108	356

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	.528	.000
	Cramer's V	.528	.000
N of Valid Cases		356	

Table 9&10: BelieveCat * sexorient2 Crosstabulation

Count		sexorient2		Total
		Heterosexual Individuals	LGBTQ Individuals	
BelieveCat	yes	247	154	401
	no	49	1	50
Total		296	155	451

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approx. Sig.
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	-.241	.000
	Cramer's V	.241	.000
N of Valid Cases		451	

Table 11: Psychological Effects of Abortion

Percentage	Not at all	Once or twice	or often	every day
I've thought about it but didn't mean to	18.92	35.14	0.38	8.11
I've tried to remove it from my thoughts.	58.11	12.16	0.19	10.81
Because of it, I had trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.	64.86	25.68	0.05	4.05
I had dreams about it.	59.46	27.03	0.09	4.05
I wanted to think about it.	37.84	43.24	0.15	5.41
I tried not to talk about it.	43.24	16.22	0.19	18.92
Pictures about it popped into my mind.	54.05	28.38	0.15	2.70
I was aware that I still had a lot of feelings about it but didn't want to deal with them.	63.51	14.86	0.08	13.51
My feelings about it have been kind of numb.	67.57	13.51	0.11	8.11
I had positive feelings about it.	13.51	17.57	0.32	29.73
I had trouble concentrating because of it.	62.16	21.62	0.15	1.35