Fall 2006

Talking about abortion: A qualitative examination of women's abortion experiences

Diana L. Dumais

University of New Hampshire, Durham

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

Recommended Citation
https://scholars.unh.edu/thesis/27

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses and Capstones by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact nicole.hentz@unh.edu.
Talking about abortion: A qualitative examination of women's abortion experiences

Abstract
The sociological literature on women's responses to the experience of abortion is remarkably sparse. This thesis seeks to contribute to redressing that research gap. I use semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twenty women from relatively diverse social backgrounds who have had abortions to explore the range of factors that they saw as being influential in their abortion decision and experience. Although the ages and the family circumstances of the women interviewed varied, and although some had more than one abortion, nevertheless, common themes emerged in their accounts of their abortion experiences. Among the most salient influences on my interviewees' experiences was the role of religion in their family, their social support networks, and their degree of awareness of feminist ideology and activism. I draw on Dorothy Smith's (1987) standpoint theory as a framework guiding this research, in particular, the notion that women's experiences should speak for themselves rather than be subject to others' interpretations of them. Taken as a whole, my research findings indicate that, while abortion is an intimate personal experience, the social and cultural context shaping that experience provides a common framework for women in making sense of their particular experience.

Keywords
Sociology, General, Women's Studies

This thesis is available at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository: https://scholars.unh.edu/thesis/27
TALKING ABOUT ABORTION: A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF WOMEN'S ABORTION EXPERIENCES

BY

Diana L. Dumais

B.A. Psychology, Keene State College, 2000

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

Sociology

September 2006
INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.
This thesis has been examined and approved.

Michele Dillon
Thesis Director, Michele Dillon, Professor of Sociology

Linda Blum, Associate Professor of Sociology

James Tucker, Associate Professor of Sociology

Jean Elson, Assistant Professor of Sociology

8/7/06
Date

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

| DEDICATION | vi |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | vii |
| ABSTRACT | viii |

**CHAPTER** | **PAGE**

**INTRODUCTION** | 1

**I. LITERATURE REVIEW** | 8

A. The Abortion Debate: Before Roe v. Wade | 8
B. Roe v. Wade and Beyond | 12
C. Abortion Attitudes | 17
D. Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Viewpoints | 22
E. Is Compromise Possible? | 24
F. Emotional Responses to Abortion | 27
G. Gaps in the Literature | 30

**II. METHODS** | 31

A. Sample | 32
B. Data Analysis | 35
C. Limitations of the Methodology | 36

**III. THE ABORTION EXPERIENCE: FEMINIST IDEOLOGY AND ACTIVISM** | 38

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
VII. CONCLUSION ..................................................................................................126
A. Feminist Ideology and Activism .....................................................................126
B. Religion and the Abortion Experience ...........................................................128
C. Abortion and Social Support ..........................................................................129
D. The Emotional Experience of Abortion .........................................................130
E. Limitations of the Research ............................................................................131
F. Theoretical Implications and Suggestions for Further Research .................131
REFERENCES ...........................................................................................................134
APPENDIX A: SUMMARY OF KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEWEES ..........140
APPENDIX B: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH AUTHORIZATION .................................................................141
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my aunt, Alison Wiggin, who inspired and encouraged me more than I was ever able to let her know.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the Sociology Department faculty for all of their help and guidance with this thesis, some of whom went above and beyond the call of duty to convince me that I would indeed finish. In particular, I would like to thank my committee members, Linda Blum, Jean Elson, and James Tucker for their support and feedback throughout the writing process. I appreciate your patience, kindness, and encouragement.

I would like to thank my thesis chair and advisor, Michele Dillon. Michele has been a constant source of support and inspiration to me since I arrived at UNH. She has had an overwhelmingly amount of faith in me throughout my graduate education and at times has believed in me more than I believed in myself. She continually challenges me to reach beyond my own expectations and for that I am forever grateful.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my Mom and Dad—Thank you for enabling me to spend my summer on this project; without that time, I do not know what I would have done. I would like to thank all of my friends and family who listened to me, eased my concerns, and never let me give up or forget why I was doing this in the first place. I love you all.

Lastly, I want to thank the women I interviewed for this project who believed in this research and shared such personal stories so honestly and openly with me—I admire your courage, your strength, and your trust.
ABSTRACT

TALKING ABOUT ABORTION: A QUALITATIVE EXAMINATION OF WOMEN’S ABORTION EXPERIENCES

By

Diana L. Dumais

University of New Hampshire, September, 2006

The sociological literature on women’s responses to the experience of abortion is remarkably sparse. This thesis seeks to contribute to redressing that research gap. I use semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twenty women from relatively diverse social backgrounds who have had abortions to explore the range of factors that they saw as being influential in their abortion decision and experience. Although the ages and the family circumstances of the women interviewed varied, and although some had more than one abortion, nevertheless, common themes emerged in their accounts of their abortion experiences. Among the most salient influences on my interviewees’ experiences was the role of religion in their family, their social support networks, and their degree of awareness of feminist ideology and activism. I draw on Dorothy Smith’s (1987) standpoint theory as a framework guiding this research, in particular, the notion that women’s experiences should speak for themselves rather than be subject to others’ interpretations of them. Taken as a whole, my research findings indicate that, while abortion is an intimate personal experience, the social and cultural context shaping that experience provides a common framework for women in making sense of their particular experience.
INTRODUCTION

Although abortion has been legal since 1973 it is still one of the most contentiously debated and politically divisive issues in American society. Abortion arguments are most visible in the political arena but the issue itself ranges far beyond the political to incorporate moral, philosophical, biological, and religious elements. Despite this complexity, abortion is often seen as a two-sided debate, one is assumed to be either a supporter of legal abortion or in opposition to it. The issue of abortion is especially important at this time in history due to the changing composition of the Federal Supreme Court as well as state legislation, proposed and enacted, that challenges a women's right to choose that option.

Much research has been done on the abortion debate, including the experience of both pro- and anti-choice activists, abortion rhetoric, and American's attitudes toward abortion (Benin 1985; DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996; Ginsburg 1989; Luker 1984; Vanderford 1989). However, the actual experiences of women who face the dilemma of unintended pregnancy and make the choice to have an abortion have been largely overlooked in the sociological literature. This thesis seeks to address this gap in the literature by providing insight into how women who have had abortions retrospectively reflect on how they come to make that decision, what social factors affect the decision-making process, and how they interpret their individual experiences.

Abortion is one of the safest and most common surgical procedures performed in the United States. Almost half of all pregnancies are unintended and of those, almost half end in abortion (Alan Guttmacher Institute 2005). In 2002, the last year for which
definitive data are available, 1.29 million pregnancies were terminated by abortion. Most women who seek abortions are in their 20s (56%), Protestant (43%), white (41%), and have never been married (67%). Low-income and poor women have more abortions than other income groups (57%). However, their overrepresentation in the abortion statistics is due to the fact that they have a higher rate of unintended pregnancy than higher income women. High-income women are actually more likely to end an unintended pregnancy by abortion.

Approximately 53% of women who are faced with an unintended pregnancy report having used a contraceptive method during the month in which they got pregnant, although that does not necessarily mean the method was used consistently and/or correctly. Sixty percent of women who terminate a pregnancy by having an abortion are mothers to at least one child and 27% have never carried a pregnancy to term or had an abortion (Alan Guttmacher Institute 2005).

The reasons women give for not carrying an unintended pregnancy to term are varied; most women report between three and four separate reasons for terminating a pregnancy. However, the two most common reasons women cite are lack of adequate economic resources with which to support a child (73%) and a feeling that having a child would interfere with future goals pertaining to work or education (74%) (Finer, et al. 2005).

Panuthos and Romeo (1984) state, based on their extensive research on childbearing losses, that women are at high risk for suffering feelings of shame, guilt, regret, and humiliation when they obtain abortions and regardless of the initial reasons for the procedure, a feeling of loss is inevitable though one may not experience those
negative emotions until days or even years later. Furthermore, Speckhard and Rue (1992) who conducted an analysis of existing abortion literature, argue that ‘postabortion syndrome’, a condition similar in nature to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, affects women who have abortions and solutions should be sought to deal with this “emerging public health concern”. However, Hopkins, Reicher, and Saleem (1996) examined how women’s psychological health is constructed in antiabortion rhetoric and found that it can lead people to believe that having an abortion is psychologically damaging when in reality it is generally a benign experience for most women.

One explanation for the possible negative psychological consequences of abortion is the public nature of the abortion debate. The pro-life side of the argument has been consistently more public than the pro-choice side perhaps because it is perceived to be more socially acceptable to argue against perceived immoral behaviors than it is to argue for personal freedom and individual rights (Carlton, Nelson, and Coleman 2000). In addition, antiabortion sentiment is frequently displayed in the media due to the fact that some activist behavior includes violence which receives a disproportionate amount of media coverage (Nice 1988). In research examining the effects of antiabortion on women entering abortion clinics, Cozzarelli, et al. (2000) report that some doctors have stopped performing abortions due to antiabortion activism, costs have risen at some clinics or they have closed down altogether due to protest activity, and women may refrain from seeking abortions in order to avoid encounters with picketers. In the same study, Cozzarelli et al. (2000) found that anger was the emotion most often reported by women who did encounter picketers at abortion clinics with feelings of guilt and shame not far behind. Despite the fact that there are very few legal behaviors that receive such public scrutiny,
women's reactions to antiabortion activities and rhetoric have rarely been studied (see Cozzarelli, et al. 2000, for one example).

Based on in-depth interviews with twenty women who have ended a pregnancy, this thesis will illuminate how women of various social, political, and religious backgrounds retrospectively describe how they come to the decision to have an abortion and how they view their experiences. This research will also illustrate that the choice to have an abortion is extremely complex regardless of one's views prior to facing an unwanted pregnancy. Furthermore, the experience of having an abortion can be a positive life-changing event for some women and not the cause of serious psychological trauma as some research suggests (e.g. Speckhard and Rue 1992). The abortion experience urged some women in this study to become more firm in their commitment to feminism and feminist activism. Some were active prior to having an abortion while others were more drawn to helping other women and participating in activities that would help preserve a woman's right to choose after, and sometimes as a result of, their own experiences.

The first chapter provides an extensive examination of the abortion literature. A brief history of the abortion debate as well as major changes in abortion laws since Roe v. Wade are outlined in order to place the issue in context and to illustrate how abortion became, and remains, such a divisive social and political issue. Research on Americans' attitudes toward abortion, how such attitudes are formed, and what effect social factors (such as education level and religious preference, for example) have on the way Americans view abortion has also been reviewed. The views of both sides of the abortion debate, which will be referred to as 'pro-life' and 'pro-choice' throughout this thesis for
the sake of simplicity and following common practice, are also presented. Lastly, research exploring how women experience abortion was reviewed. I found that such research is largely missing from the sociological literature despite the many social factors affecting both activist views and behaviors and those of average American citizens. Furthermore, the existing research on the psychological effects of abortion rarely utilizes a qualitative design and does not focus on how women’s interpretations of their experiences change over time, or how the women themselves change as a result of their abortion.

The second chapter outlines the methods that were used in this study. I provide details about the sample (twenty women who had one or more abortions), interview data analysis, and limitations of the methods.

In the third chapter, I present findings from the interviews on feminist beliefs and activist behavior. I discuss how women’s experiences with abortion influence their feminist and/or activist behavior and how, in some cases, activist behavior and feminist ideology influenced the decision-making process when women were faced with unintended pregnancies. Some of the women I spoke with had a strong feminist background as a result of their education or upbringing and felt empowered by their beliefs. Other women, because of their own experience with abortion as well as other issues, like domestic violence, for example, felt compelled to reach out to women in similar circumstances and began to engage in activist and/or feminist behavior for the first time. For example, a couple of the women in this study worked as escorts at abortion clinics, helping walk women seeking abortions through lines of antiabortion
protestors. Other women who considered themselves active in women's rights prior to their abortions only felt stronger in their beliefs as a result.

In the fourth chapter, I review interview findings related to the religious experiences, both prior to and since the participants' abortion. Several of the women I spoke with experienced some conflict about their decision to have an abortion connected to the religion in which they were raised. One woman, who has become Christian since having her abortion, discusses how difficult it has been for her to reconcile her belief in God and her faith in her religion with her abortion. Other women rejected their faiths, either before or as an indirect result of their abortions. Though most of the women interviewed belonged at some point in their lives to a Christian-based church there appears to be no connection between how they reacted to their abortions and their individual religions. Some who were raised in practicing Catholic families, for example, never questioned whether or not they had been "wrong" or "sinned" by having an abortion, while others felt the need to ask God's forgiveness.

In the fifth chapter, I examine the family relationships of participants as well as other possible support systems, such as friends and/or partners. In addition, I explore the issue of non-support, in the form of harassment, criticism, and ostracism. Most of the women interviewed reported having someone to support them through their abortions; those whose families were absent, either because they were not aware of the situation or did not approve, generally relied on a friend who had been in a similar situation or their partners. Though it appears that those who experienced more negative reactions from their families in regard to their abortions also experienced more conflict about their decisions, it is difficult to separate those circumstances from the larger context. For
example, some women, like Meredith, had such tumultuous circumstances in their lives that it is unclear where any inner conflict may have originated. Those women who had the support of someone close to them did report fewer problems in dealing with their abortions. However, it is also difficult to determine whether the connection to their support systems was the reason for that or if they went into the experience of having an abortion with better expectations for coping with it.

In the sixth chapter, I examine women’s experiences with abortion including how they came to make the decision to have an abortion, how they felt during and after the procedure, and how they feel presently about their experience. While some women had a difficult time with the process and wrestled with various issues, from religion to family relationships to their views of themselves, all of the women interviewed concluded that they made the right decision in the end, making very clear the difference between what they felt about their experiences and how they think about it. In other words, while some women never wavered in their decisions to have an abortion, they still expressed grief, sadness, and regret over the circumstances. Some of the women found themselves changed for the better as a result of their experience and believe it helped them in some way, whether they became more responsible concerning sex or otherwise changed their lives completely to avoid repeating their mistakes. Some even believe they would not be who they are today had they not been able to obtain an abortion.

In the final chapter, I summarize the findings of this research and discuss their implications. Limitations and suggestions for future research are also presented.
CHAPTER I
LITERATURE REVIEW

The Abortion Debate: Before Roe v. Wade

According to Petchesky ([1984] 1990), women have practiced both abortion and the use of birth control throughout history. Likewise, the idea that abortion should be considered murder because an "embryo is the moral equivalent of the child it will become," has competed throughout history with the notion that abortion can not be considered a murderous act because although an embryo may possess some of the rights of a child, which increase as a pregnancy progresses, it is of a "different moral order" (Luker 1984:11). However, the earliest debate in American history occurred in the 19th century and was mostly confined to physicians who, in seeking to gain legitimacy for and increase the prestige of their profession, attempted to illustrate that they, and only they, were able to distinguish between those abortions that were murderous and those that were "necessary".

Physicians argued that American women did not understand the value of the life of an embryo and were having abortions based on this ignorance. In other words, women who had abortions were at fault but excused from this fault since they were unaware of what they were really doing and physicians asserted that by seeking to control the use of abortion, they were also saving women from their own misguided actions. Physicians were also in competition with "quacks"—midwives, homeopaths, healers, etc.—who interfered with their attempts to gain control of the medical profession by providing
alternatives to their services, most of which were accessible only to those with the economic and/or social resources to obtain them, much like today. The issue of abortion helped physicians by allowing them to demonstrate their superiority of knowledge and expertise in medicine as well as their high moral standards. In essence, physician attempts to control abortion were also attempts to control the medical profession as a whole (Ginsburg 1989; Linders 1998; Luker 1984).

By 1890, antiabortion statutes had been enacted in all fifty states and physicians had virtually accomplished their goal of gaining control over the practice of medicine. Abortions were legal only if performed by a physician in order to “preserve the life of the woman” (Luker 1984:36). However, Luker (1984) states that such laws did little to change what actually went on in women’s lives and states two reasons why this is so. First, despite the success of physicians to professionalize medicine, much of its practice still occurred in the home and women were most likely able to utilize abortive techniques without formal medical consultation. Secondly, it was in the best professional interest of physicians to provide women who were able to consult with them with abortions rather than lose such business to other, more sympathetic physicians—or alternative practitioners—with what were perhaps looser definitions of what constituted necessary abortions.

Although illegal abortions were prosecuted after American statutes were enacted, and many women undoubtedly continued to utilize home remedies, the professionalization of medicine and the fact that physicians had effectively gained control over much of the practice of abortion eliminated it from much public scrutiny until the middle of the 20th century when the abortion debate was reignited and has since remained

Interestingly, while physicians were largely, if not wholly responsible for the criminalization of abortion, they also played a major role in beginning the transition to its legalization. Two major events provoked new physician debate and consequently brought the issue of abortion into public view: The case of Sherri Finkbine and the rubella outbreak in California in the mid-1960s (Luker 1984; Tribe 1990).

Sherri Finkbine, who was the host of the public television show, Romper Room, is probably less well-known for her role in the abortion controversy that emerged prior to Roe v. Wade. Finkbine had been taking a sleeping pill that contained the ingredient Thalidomide, which was determined to cause severe birth defects if taken by a pregnant woman. When Finkbine became pregnant she was advised by her doctor that an abortion would probably be in her best interest as well as that of her unborn child. Finkbine decided to take the advice of her doctor and scheduled an abortion for the day after her consultation. However, Finkbine, in trying to prevent more women from facing the same dilemma, decided to warn the public of the dangers of Thalidomide and went to the media. When news of her imminent abortion got out, there was a massive public outcry and her abortion was canceled. Finkbine ended up traveling to Sweden to obtain an abortion, after being granted approval under what was then rather restrictive policy and once the procedure was completed, the attending physician determined that the child she was carrying would never have survived the pregnancy.

The rubella outbreak in California in the 1960s contained elements similar to those in the Finkbine case. If rubella is contracted within the first sixteen weeks of a
pregnancy there is a good chance (estimated at the time to be approximately 30%) that
the fetus will suffer severe injury resulting in such conditions as mental retardation,
blindness, deafness, cardiac problems, etc. (Luker 1984). Abortion under the
circumstances of rubella was quite common but physicians became wary of performing
abortions for this reason because they feared the legal repercussions that might be
brought about by those with ‘strict constructionist’ viewpoints—those who believed that
any abortion constituted murder if it was not done in order to save the mother’s life
(Ginsburg 1989). In other words, performing an abortion for the child’s own good was
considered unacceptable to some who had begun to make their feelings known when the
Finkbine case emerged a couple years prior to the rubella outbreak. In short, physicians
began attempting to gain legal protection for the performance of “therapeutic” abortions
to be sure they were practicing within the boundaries of the law (Luker 1984).

Beyond mobilizing physicians to action, both the Finkbine case and the rubella
outbreak changed the focus of the abortion debate by making it more about under what
conditions a pregnancy could or should be terminated than whether or not the embryo
was indeed considered a life (Hout 1999). According to Luker (1984), however, such
cases transformed the issue of abortion from a technical decision to a moral one. As
Luker (1984) states, for example, “The Finkbine case forced people to define exactly
what circumstances in principle constituted legitimate grounds for abortion, and it forced
doctors to define exactly what they were doing when they were performing an abortion”
(pp. 78-9). At the same time, the question of the necessity of abortion became harder to
answer due to advances in medical technology that lessened the chances that a woman’s
life would be put in danger during pregnancy or childbirth (Tribe 1990). As what were
seen as legitimate reasons for a woman to obtain an abortion became less important, public scrutiny over the necessity of any abortions grew and the debate as we know it today began.

*Roe v. Wade and Beyond*

When several physicians were charged with performing illegal abortions connected to the California rubella outbreak, abortions that were performed according to the existing law, it became clear that as long as there was an active constituency that believed that any abortion that was not performed specifically to save the life of the mother was wrong, then certain circumstances for abortion that were largely accepted by the public—abortion in cases of rape, threats to the health rather just the life of the mother, and fetal damage, for example—could be prohibited. As physicians began to question each other as to the specific terms under which an abortion should be permitted, a new group of people were mobilizing who were not satisfied with attempts to merely reform abortion law but who wanted the laws repealed entirely.

Up until the 1960s, many were satisfied with decisions concerning abortion being left almost entirely up to physicians (Luker 1984). Attempts at abortion reform were successful in California and broadened the terms in which abortions could be performed to include the above situations, but physicians were still mainly in control of who could obtain abortions. However, the tide soon turned and elite women (and later, grassroots organizations) were calling for a complete change in the decision-making process, one that would put the decision to have an abortion in the hands of those whom it affected most specifically—women.
Although women had been involved in the abortion debate previously, Luker points out that their arguments were almost identical to those of their male counterparts; they too were elite professionals, largely involved in medicine and the law who desired legal protection for necessary or “therapeutic” abortions. It was not until the late 1960s that the “right” of women to abortion became central to the abortion debate. The argument for women’s choice was brought about by “[a] group of women who valued motherhood but valued it on their own timetable” who asserted that abortion was, in fact, a women’s right, and felt that rather than being seen as individuals with the ability to choose, they were being viewed merely as “potential mothers” (Luker 1984:92). Furthermore, while the women’s movement had made considerable gains in other areas of life, these gains were thought to be meaningless if women were not even able to make decisions about their own bodies (Petchesky ([1984] 1990).

As women became more involved, and the ‘personal’ became ‘political’, the abortion rate was increasing dramatically and abortion laws in several states were becoming more liberal. For example, in 1970, New York legalized abortions performed by physicians up to the twenty-fourth week of pregnancy and the abortion rate in California increased by 2000 percent between 1968 and 1972 (Kaplan 1995; Luker 1984:94). What had come to be seen as solution of compromise was looking more and more like ‘abortion on demand’. In other words, women were having abortions because they wanted them and not simply because they were being advised or permitted to do so by their doctors. While the perceived increase in the number of abortions being performed in the 19th century was a catalyst for the criminalization of abortion, the
increase in abortions in the 1960s was cited as a reason for reforming abortion law (Ginsburg 1989).

Those working toward abortion reform realized that in order to make real changes in existing laws, they would need support from the larger public. One organization in California, for example, the Society for Humane Abortions, began educating and surveying the public in order to determine what the average citizen thought. They were soon able to illustrate that most of the people they spoke with supported a women’s right to choose to have an abortion, especially to preserve women’s health and in cases of rape or incest. With this information they were also able to show that existing abortion laws could be interpreted to prohibit even those abortions that were largely supported publicly depending on the interpretation of those laws (Luker 1984).

In 1973, after almost a decade of argument for abortion laws to be at least reformed, and at best, repealed, the Supreme Court ruled in two landmark cases, Roe v. Wade and Doe v. Bolton, to overturn existing abortion law stating that the right of women to decide to terminate a pregnancy was fundamental and a part of the “right to privacy” that the Court had recognized in earlier cases. Specifically, in 1965, the Court had ruled in Griswold v. Connecticut that married couples had a right to access contraception and in 1972, in Eisenstadt v. Baird, the Court struck down prohibition of access to contraceptives for those who were not married. The Court’s opinion in both of these cases was that the government does not have the right to interfere in personal matters, such as childbearing or childbirth, and that right was extended in Roe v. Wade to include the decision to have an abortion. According to the Supreme Court, abortion was to be permitted throughout the first trimester of pregnancy if performed by a licensed
physician. In the second trimester, the state would only be permitted to intervene to protect the health of the woman having the abortion, and in the third trimester the state would be permitted to prohibit abortion unless the health of the mother was threatened (Petchesky [1984] 1990; Tribe 1990).

As a result of the Roe v. Wade decision, abortion legislation in 49 states and Washington, D.C. was invalidated. Many of the existing laws were repealed completely while others were replaced with new laws, and still others were left as they stood but no longer enforced (Petchesky [1984] 1990; Tribe 1990). Socially speaking, according to Ginsburg (1989), while the Court's decision was a product of the social change that was occurring in the United States at the time, it was also "a catalyst to subsequent developments that Americans have come to identify as the current controversy, particularly the rise of the Right-to-Life movement" (p.15); a movement that would become extremely organized in its efforts overturn Roe v. Wade.

Since Roe v. Wade passed, abortion has become the "preeminent political issue" (Hout 1999). There have been various challenges to the Court's decision, some of which have made the prospect of Roe v. Wade being overturned a possible reality. For example, in 1976 in the case of Planned Parenthood v. Danforth, the Supreme Court ruled that against a Missouri law that required a married woman to obtain approval from her husband prior to having an abortion and also ruled against requiring minors to obtain written parental consent in order to obtain an abortion. In 1977, in a backward step from Roe v. Wade, Congress passed the Hyde Amendment which restricted the use of public funding, including Medicaid, for abortions.
In City of Akron v. Akron Center for Reproductive Health in 1983, the Supreme Court ruled that the law requiring minors to obtain parental consent before having an abortion must provide an alternative. A minor could request approval from a judge if she could prove she was mature enough to make the decision to have an abortion or if she could provide a compelling enough reason why she could not reveal her situation to her parents. Though on the surface, this decision appears to be a step forward, in reality the process of scheduling an appearance before a judge and negotiating the parameters of the law were both complicated and intimidating (National Organization for Women 2006; Petchesky [1984] 1990; Tribe 1990).

In the case of Webster v. Reproductive Health Services in 1989 the Supreme Court decision upheld several abortion statutes in Missouri. It prohibited the use of public facilities and employees for the purposes of performing abortions and also upheld restrictions involving parental consent for minors, and requirements for antiabortion counseling and specific waiting periods before an abortion could be obtained. In a similar case in 1992, Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey, the Supreme Court refused to overturn Roe v. Wade but nevertheless upheld the same restrictions as those in Missouri only invalidating the requirement for spousal notification of the abortion prior to the procedure (National Organization for Women 2006).

Most recently, the South Dakota State Senate approved a bill that would ban most abortions, including those in cases of rape or incest. While the law was scheduled to go into effect on July 1, 2006, abortion rights advocates filed petitions with enough signatures to cause the bill to go to vote in the November election (Holusha 2006). If passed in November, the South Dakota law will most likely be appealed and the debate
may end up being settled by an increasingly conservative Supreme Court. For now, however, Roe v. Wade stands as it was written in 1973 but the fight over the legality of abortion is anything but over. While Roe v. Wade was most definitely a success for the extremely focused pro-choice movement, it was also a "critical event for the right-to-life movement, marking the transformation of the relatively small pro-life effort that was already in existence into a national, well-organized social movement" (Ginsburg 1989:42). In the more than thirty years since Roe, the pro-life movement has remained extremely active while those on the pro-choice side, feeling that the battle over abortion rights was won, have been viewed as relaxing their efforts somewhat, though they also remain quite active (Luker 1984). However, with the more recent developments discussed above, the stage is set for the abortion debate to become fully reignited and for both sides to mobilize in full force.

*Abortion Attitudes*

*Abortion Politics.* According to Hout (1999), it was not until the 1970s that abortion became such a divisive issue in American politics. Prior to 1973, liberals and conservatives were equally split as to where they stood on abortion. Although both sides had their share of single-issue voters—those who choose which political candidate to vote for based on that candidate's abortion stance—the pro-life side of the debate engaged in this practice considerably more than the pro-choice side from the start.

Abortion attitudes were not a factor in presidential elections until 1988, and were not clearly associated with political partisanship until 1992. Today, pro-life attitudes are clearly associated with the Republican party, while Democrats are more liberal in their abortion attitudes. In contrast with political behavior in the 1970s and 1980s, in the
1990s people became more likely to match their views on abortion to other issues or to change their general political views in order to make them consistent with others sharing the same stance on abortion (Hout 1999). Carlton, Nelson, and Coleman (2000) argue that politicians who are pro-life in their views of abortion are also more likely than pro-choice politicians to use those views as part of their political platforms enabling voters to easily distinguish between pro-choice and pro-life candidates.

While liberal opinion on the issue of abortion has become more unified, conservative opinion has become more internally polarized. For example, conservatives, who generally oppose abortion, are internally divided in their attitudes between those who believe abortion in any circumstance is wrong and those who think there are exceptions as in cases where the mother’s life is in danger (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996). Furthermore, liberal men and women, according to Hout (1999) share similar opinions on abortion while conservative women oppose abortion more than conservative men. Hout argues that one reason the abortion debate is so heated is that it is also about sex, especially the context in which unintended pregnancy occurs; abortion is sometimes seen as a contributing factor to sexually promiscuous attitudes and this is another reason conservative groups are opposed to its legality (Hout 1999; Petchesky [1984] 1990).

General Public Opinion. The General Social Survey (GSS) differentiates between seven different circumstances in which a woman might seek an abortion and respondents indicate how acceptable they feel an abortion would be in each circumstance. These reasons are generally further divided into two scales, hard and soft. The “hard” reasons a woman might have an abortion are a defect in the fetus, a mother’s life being endangered by the pregnancy, and pregnancy resulting from rape or incest. The “soft” reasons are
generally described as low income family, unmarried woman, and the family does not wish to have any more children. The last category listed on the GSS is abortion for any reason (Wang and Buffalo 2004).

While the hard reasons for choosing an abortion are mainly medical in nature, the soft reasons are more social (Benin 1985). The most support for abortion is in cases in which the woman’s health is in danger. Cases in which a woman becomes pregnant as a result of rape or incest are also supported by most Americans. About half of Americans agree that abortion should be a legal option for women who are not financially capable of supporting a child, are unmarried, or do not want any more children (Hout 1999).

Wang and Buffalo (2004) examined the effect of socio-cultural influences, such as education level, gender role attitudes, and fundamentalist beliefs, on abortion attitudes using GSS data and found no significant changes in Americans’ attitudes toward abortion since 1972. However, in a study examining whether Americans’ social attitudes have become more polarized concerning social issues such as abortion, attitudes toward the poor, and women’s roles in the public sphere, DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson (1996), also using data from the General Social Survey in addition to data from the National Election Study between the early 1970s and 1994, found that Americans have become more divided on the issue of abortion.

Benin (1985) also used General Social Survey data in order to explore what factors in one’s life affect their attitudes about abortion on both the hard and soft scales. People’s demographic information, such as income level and education, may help predict attitudes for social reasons to have an abortion but fail to do so for medical reasons. Hout (1999) states that increasing support for legal abortion in the years since Roe v.
Wade is linked to increases in both the number of college-educated people and women who were in the labor force as well as a decrease in the number of women who were married because women who are married or widowed tend to be more pro-life than those who have never been married or who are divorced. Wang and Buffalo (2004) found that people who have higher levels of education are more likely to have lower motivation to have children, to support equality in women's roles in society, and are more likely to support legal abortion as a result.

Religion also plays an important role in how people view abortion. Kelley, Evans, and Headey (1993) argue that religion is the most important source of the abortion controversy (p.589). The author's state: "...the 'religious factor' continues to structure many people's worldviews, their moralities, and their definitions of which zones of life should be subject to social control and which should be governed by individual choice." While people may diverge in their opinions on abortion for other non-religious reasons, the sharpest conflicts occur between religious and secular people.

A strong religious influence in addition to lower levels of education increases the chances that one will oppose abortion for both hard and soft reasons, according to Benin (1985). According to Luker (1984), Catholics were the first to adopt an outspoken pro-life stance—the first official Papal statement condemning abortion was delivered in 1869. Hout (1999) found, not surprisingly, that Catholics and Protestants are the most pro-life of the major religions examined using GSS data. Benin (1985) found that older Catholics and Baptists are most likely to oppose abortion while younger Catholics and Baptists who do not attend church frequently—less than once per month—are no more opposed to abortion than the majority of the population.
Hout (1999) argues that while religion is important in deciding where individuals stand on the issue of abortion, it is attitudes towards sex as well as gender that account for most of the differences in Americans' opinions about abortion. Those who are more traditional in their views regarding women's roles in work and the home are also less likely to support abortion than those who hold more progressive views (Benin 1985; Hout 1999; Wang and Buffalo 2004).

The abortion issue is so divisive because it is so closely tied to what people think about women, children, and family in general: "...the abortion debate has been transformed because it has "gone public" and in so doing has called into question individuals' most sacrosanct beliefs...the abortion debate is so passionate and hard-fought because it is a referendum on the place and meaning of motherhood" (Luker 1984:193, italics in original). Furthermore, Luker argues, if one side "wins", the other side will face a devaluation of the ways they believe they should live their lives.

It has been argued that one of the most disturbing things about the abortion debate is that although it has brought many women together for a common cause, it has also pitted women against each other. For any compromise to be reached each side is going to have to sacrifice something very important and divisions are so strong, such a compromise does not seem likely (Mensch and Freeman 1993). In order to examine the debate more closely, it is important to look at abortion attitudes on both sides in more detail. Beginning with the views on the pro-life side of the debate then moving to how the pro-choice side views abortion, the next section will illustrate exactly why a consensus has not, and possibly will not, be reached.
Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Viewpoints

To abortion activists, abortion represents a conflict between individual achievement and reproduction, motherhood, and nurturance. While clearly in sharp conflict, both sides perceive themselves as working to help rather than harm women's position in society (Ginsburg 1989). While pro-choice groups argue that women can fill multiple roles in society, pro-life activists believe that pregnancy and motherhood are “two essential conditions of female gender identity”. When women reject that role by having abortions they are essentially committing an act that pro-life people see as anti-woman. Traditional gender differences, according to those on the pro-life side, are “critical to biological, cultural, and social reproduction” and the availability of abortion undermines that process and devalues the traditional concept of the family (Ginsburg 1989:216).

Ginsburg (1989) explains that the pro-choice side of the debate sees these gender differences as symptomatic of pervasive gender discrimination in society. Part of the solution to the problem of inequality is to attempt to create change in both the economic and political systems. Abortion rights are important in facilitating some of this change because they enable “women to have the power to control whether, when, and with whom they will have children” (p.7). Ginsburg argues that pregnancy and childbearing have different effects on women than on men, one of which is that in a system of inequality, women are expected to forsake their roles in the workforce in order to fulfill their roles at home, rather than there being a more egalitarian split in responsibilities between women and men. Being able to control their own reproductive behavior also enables women to better control other aspects of their lives.
Pro-life activists also believe that abortion devalues motherhood and nurturance in addition to "undermining an informal cultural code that links sex with reproduction and male support of families" (Ginsburg 1989:7). Abortion results in giving the impression that the ability to reproduce and have children is a liability rather than an asset. Pro-life supporters argue that men and women are fundamentally different and rather than fulfilling potential outside the home, they see motherhood as the most important role for women. Abortion, they think, devalues women in part because it enables men to exploit women for sex without having to consider the possibility of being responsible for any children that may result from it as long as women can terminate their pregnancies at will (Ginsburg 1989; Luker 1984). However, abortion rights supporters argue that motherhood is not the only role for women and that control over reproductive rights is a necessary element for women to live up to their full potential in all areas.

Pro-life commitment to fighting legalized abortion has proved successful over the years. For one reason, since Roe v. Wade, the general public has only weakly supported abortion rights while the pro-life side has been intense in its fight against them (Luker 1984). Improvements in technology also helped the pro-life side gain greater support because the chances of women seeking abortions for health reasons, such as a pregnancy endangering her life, have decreased over time. However, so have the risks associated with abortion (Luker 1984). Luker (1984) also argues that one of the unfortunate consequences of the early success of pro-choice activists is that many feel that Roe v. Wade was a signal that the abortion rights battle had been officially won. However, with so many threats to Roe v. Wade, and women's rights and access to abortion over the
years, it is clear that lack of involvement on the part of pro-choice supporters now could lead to negative consequences concerning abortion law.

Is Compromise Possible?

The abortion controversy represents the type of issue which is difficult to resolve. Opinions are relatively intense, at least in some circles, and the issue does not readily lend itself to compromise. Matters are made even more difficult by the fact the abortion controversy is enmeshed in a host of other complex issues involving the role of women in society, reproductive freedom, and relationships between religion and the political system. The abortion issue is, therefore, practically certain to generate considerable dissatisfaction no matter what is done (Nice 1988:192).

Hunter (1991) argues that the way in which abortion is discussed and debated is more polarized than the American public in general. In other words, the language used by either side of the argument may be extreme in nature but those who are truly extremist in their beliefs are few and unfortunately, “…voices of quiet, reflective passion are rarely heard” (p.159). As a result, positions on issues like abortion that fall more to the middle of both extremes end up getting “played into the grid of opposing rhetorical extremes” (p.161, italics in original). Just as those on the pro-choice side of the abortion debate may overlook certain aspects of the pro-life argument those on the pro-life side are just as likely to overlook those aspects of Roe v. Wade that are liberating for women, perhaps because for one side to acknowledge the validity of the others’ arguments may be seen as weakening their own (Mensch and Freeman 1993).

Although the intensity of opinions on the pro-life side has definitely provided considerable fuel for the continuation of the abortion debate, Scott and Schuman (1988) argue that it is this very intensity that may end up hurting the pro-life cause. While some may be attracted to the pro-life side because of its passionate stance, those who are more

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
temperate in their views may relate better to those on the pro-choice side simply for the fact that there appears to be more room for moderate views there than on the other.

One of the critiques made by Wang and Buffalo (2004) of the pro-choice movement is the tendency for those involved to not see how their arguments might alienate some women. In their discourse, pro-choice activists tend to avoid the topic of religion altogether, quite possibly as a result of the pro-life side's steadfast devotion to it. However, in avoiding religion, abortion supporters quite possibly fail to gain the support of more moderately religious women who feel their faith is devalued by pro-choice arguments.

Abortion activists on either side of the debate also engage in tactics which present the opposing side as extremist in their views. By doing so, each side is able to also assert that the views of the other are not representative of the larger society but rather represent the minority opinion while the accusing side is more in line with the views of mainstream society (Hunter 1991). Other research suggests that activists engage in demonization of their opponents in their rhetoric which can have a powerful effect on the emotions of potential supporters and may be very important to people's involvement in social movements whether such emotional reactions happen outside of a social movement or within it (Jasper 1998). In fact, Jasper (1998) argues that "[i]t is affects and emotional responses that political organizers appeal to, arouse, manipulate, and sustain to recruit and retain members" (p.405).

In a study examining the argumentative complexity of the discourse of both pro-choice and pro-life organizations, Dillon (1993) found that those contributing to the public abortion debate tend to use rather simplistic arguments to support their position
and avoid alternative strategies. Though this technique appeals to relatively few
Americans who are extreme in their support of one side over the other, one of the
consequences of it may be that it alienates those with more moderate views, such as
favoring legal but restricted abortion. In other words, neither side of the public abortion
debate speaks to the middle—those people who do not agree with extremes on either side
(Mensch and Freeman 1993).

While some would argue that abortion is an issue about which Americans will
never reach a compromise (see Tribe 1990, for example), Dillon (1995) suggests that
may not be the case. Although Americans do disagree on the issue, Dillon argues that
most Americans think abortion should remain legal but do “express reservations” about
its availability (p.129). Furthermore, there is evidence to support that the pro-choice and
pro-life sides of the debate share a “moral framework”; both sides value motherhood but
diverge as to what exactly that means (p.128). Because compromise is possible in other
areas of political life, it would follow that eventual compromise in the abortion
controversy is a possibility.

According to Hunter (1991), the abortion issue is used by those in the political
realm as a “distraction” that prevents Americans from turning their attention to more
important issues (p.49). Furthermore, he argues, abortion is such a contentious issue
because it is one of many issues in the United States that represents a struggle over
national identity, or what exactly it means to be truly American. The abortion debate,
according to Hunter, is a debate about competing moral ideologies—what constitutes
right and wrong, what obligations we, as citizens, have to one another, and what
community means. Hunter also argues that any resolution to the abortion battle “seems
sociologically impossible” because although Americans might view the same issues as problematic, the language with which they discuss issues such as abortion is too contrary to allow an agreement to be reached.

**Emotional Responses to Abortion**

Previous research on the experiences of women who have abortions has found no direct connection between the abortion experience itself and negative psychological consequences. Most often, any negative psychological outcomes, such as depression or lowered self-esteem, for example, are related more to the specific circumstances of a woman’s life prior to her abortion or to a lack of social support through the abortion process (see Mueller and Major 1989; Russo and Denious 2001; Russo and Zierk 1992 for examples). Furthermore, much of the existing research is often framed in black and white terms making it is easy for both opponents and proponents of abortion to use women’s descriptions of their own experiences as fodder for the debate, rather than using them to transform the way we discuss abortion (Arthur 1997; Avalos 1999; Speckhard and Rue 1992).

For example, based on a review of literature, Speckhard and Rue (1992) conclude that there is some reluctance on the part of researchers to draw attention to the possible negative consequences of abortion for fear of providing support for antiabortion groups. Arthur (1997) argues, based on a review of existing psychiatric research, that often times women are portrayed in the literature as either “victims”—those women who are somehow pushed by circumstances beyond their control to have abortions, or “deviants”—women who do not experience any conflict about having abortions. According to Coleman, et al. (2005), progress in research on the experiences of women

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
having abortions has been thwarted due to the sociopolitical agendas of researchers who are seeking to support a specific side of the debate and methodological problems.

As Fielding and Schaff (2004) state, women do not lead their lives according to black and white moral or religious standards and when choosing abortion, most women have more practical concerns such as whether or not they have the financial means to support a child or whether they feel they are at a point in their lives where they can provide a child with the kind of upbringing they believe is acceptable. Those who choose to have abortions often feel that children have a right to feel that they are wanted and that they are loved. If a woman feels incapable of providing such love, having an abortion can be less detrimental to her well-being, as well as the well-being of the child, than having a child before one is ready (Burnell and Norfleet 2001; Russo and Zierk 1992).

Joy (1985) argues based on her clinical work with women who have had abortions that people often assume that women who have abortions have nothing to grieve and face a “socially negated loss”, a loss that is overlooked or ignored due to the fact that such a loss is seen as a ‘choice’ and not merely something unfortunate that has occurred in a woman’s life. However, the choice to have an abortion can acknowledge the emotional pain that might accompany it and as Avalos (1999) argues based on interviews with twenty women who had abortions, many emotional reactions to having an abortion are possible. In fact, the same woman may have varying reactions to her abortion simultaneously and over time, that woman may perceive her abortion experience differently than she did immediately following her procedure. Women may also reevaluate their experience with abortion in terms of the course their lives have taken since the event transpired. For some women, Avalos (1999) states, a reappraisal of their
situation confirms for them that they made the right choice in having an abortion. For others, looking back on their experience allows them to see options they did not at the time and may create doubt.

Facing an unwanted pregnancy and making the decision to have an abortion are understandably stressful events in a woman’s life. Based on research utilizing survey data from over five thousand women, Russo and Zierk (1992), argue that the psychological effects of abortion can not be separated from those of unwanted pregnancy. Furthermore, a woman’s mental health prior to having an abortion is more important in determining her response to having an abortion than the abortion itself (Russo and Denious 2001). While some women do report higher levels of depression and lower levels of general well-being following an abortion, those feelings tend to dissipate with time, and for most women, abortion is an emotionally benign experience (Coleman, et al. 2005; Mueller and Major 1989; Panuthos and Romeo 1984; Russo and Dabul 1997).

In recent years, however, there has been growing debate over the existence of “post-abortion syndrome (PAS). While some argue that it is an “emerging public health concern”, other researchers believe that it is an invention of the pro-life side of the debate designed to frame abortion as harmful to women (Hopkins, Reicher, and Saleem 1996; Speckhard and Rue 1992).

Speckhard and Rue (1992) argue that Postabortion Syndrome is a subset of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder with similar symptoms. Those who suffer from PAS exhibit the following characteristics:

1. They have been exposed to or participated in an abortion experience and have perceived that experience as traumatic.
2. They re-experience the abortion uncontrollably and negatively in their mind.

3. They have been unsuccessful in attempts to avoid or deny abortion recollections that are painful.

4. They experience negative psychological symptoms that they did not prior to their experience, such as guilt, for example.

Those who question the existence of PAS argue that antiabortion advocates use the disorder to place themselves in a favorable light as caring and compassionate individuals who have the best interests of women in mind. In addition, by allowing women to feel denial through their definitions of PAS, those who argue for its existence can claim that women who appear to come out of the abortion experience psychologically unscathed are actually repressing the negative feelings they have (Hopkins, Reicher, and Saleem 1996).

Gaps in the Literature

As mentioned earlier, although some sociological research has been done on the ways women experience abortion (see Avalos 1999), most has been conducted from a psychological perspective. Additionally, much of the research reviewed on the experience of abortion is based on survey methods which fail to uncover the intricacies of women's experiences. This study utilizes in-depth interviews with women who have had abortions to examine how social factors come into play in the way women talk about them.
CHAPTER II
METHODS

Based on an analytical review of the literature on women’s experiences with abortion, Coleman, et al. (2005) found that most of the existing research utilized questionnaire-based methods of inquiry and focused on how women perceive their experiences hours or weeks after their abortion with little research conducted beyond the six months following an abortion. While questionnaire-based methods are useful in allowing researchers to reach large numbers of women and are less time-consuming than more in-depth methods, they may fail to elicit participants’ views and opinions as well as the meanings they attach to their experiences (Avalos 1999; Cresswell 2003). As stated by Coleman, et al. (2005):

Qualitative studies probing women’s thoughts and feelings pertaining to personal, relationship, and contextual factors that entered into their decisions to abort as well as postabortion emotions, thoughts, and experiences (personal and professional) are needed to do justice to the inherent complexity of this area of study. The use of open-ended questions posed by empathetic interviewers, who convey the wide range of emotions women may experience in response to an abortion, is likely to result in rich data that is less vulnerable than other methodologies to social desirability biases (p. 250).

I performed an extensive review of the literature and found a number of studies utilizing survey methods to examine the way in which women experience abortion, most of which were found in the psychological literature (Burnell and Norfleet 2001; Major and Cozzarelli 1992; Russo and Dabul 1997; Russo and Denious 2001; Russo and Zierk 1992). Only three studies were found which used more in-depth methods. Avalos (1999) interviewed women from two months to twenty-seven years following their abortions,
Fielding and Schaff (2004) interviewed women who had medical abortions using RU-486 (mifepristone) from one to six weeks after their follow-up clinic visits, and Cozzarelli, et al. (2000) interviewed women both immediately and two years after their abortions in regard to their experiences with antiabortion demonstrators upon entering one of three abortion facilities in Buffalo, NY. Of those three studies, only one was done from a sociological perspective (Avalos 1999). This project seeks to address the gap in sociological literature focusing on how women experience abortion in the long term as well as add to the body of literature utilizing in-depth interviews in order to explore how women experience and give meaning to their experiences.

Sample

Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling method. The sampling technique used was designed to allow women who were willing to discuss their abortions to contact me at their convenience rather than be approached by me. In addition, because the sample was recruited via email, I was able to attract participants from a variety of areas within the United States contributing to the diversity of the sample. A letter was composed and inserted into an email message and sent to several women contacts who were then asked to forward the message to contacts of their own. The only stipulation placed on participants was that they be over the age of eighteen. Within a week, eight women had volunteered to be interviewed. As the recruitment process seemed to stall, the email was posted on two online list serves catering to a mostly female, mostly academic audience. Responses began coming in within two hours and women responded from all over the United States and beyond. Due to concerns regarding the incorporation of a cross-cultural element in this research, those who were not residents of the United
States at the time of the interviews were not considered. However, several of the women had abortions outside the United States and those interviews were considered though of those women, all were raised in and have subsequently returned to the United States. Of those women, one had an abortion in England, one in China, one in Nicaragua, and one in Sweden. Seventeen women (84%) had had only one abortion while three (16%) had two or more. Twenty women were interviewed in total. Eight women are from the New England area and all eight were interviewed face-to-face. The remaining twelve women were from Northeast, Midwest, South, and Southwest. Interviews lasted from forty-five to ninety minutes. See Appendix A for a summary of key characteristics of the interviewees.

Approximately half of the interviews were conducted in person with the remainder conducted over the telephone. The conversations were audio-taped with the expressed consent of the participants. Women who were interviewed in person were provided with a paper copy of the consent letter and those who were interviewed via telephone were emailed a copy of the same letter in advance of the interview and their participation was indicative of their consent. In addition, prior to the telephone interviews, women were asked if they received and read the consent letter, if they had any questions or concerns about the interview process, and an appropriate time to call was decided upon by the interviewee. I phoned the interviewees at the agreed upon time and after a brief introduction, I informed them I would begin recording. Whether in person or over the telephone, interviews lasted approximately an hour with the shortest being forty-five minutes and the longest approximately ninety minutes. Participants were
offered a list of referrals for future counseling if the interview raised any upsetting memories or uncovered any unresolved issues.

In 2002, the last year for which definitive data are available, most women who sought abortions were in their twenties (56%), Protestant (43%), white (41%), and have never been married (67%). While low-income and poor women have more abortions than other income groups (57%), their overrepresentation in the abortion statistics is due to the fact that they have a higher rate of unintended pregnancy than higher income women. High income women are actually more likely to end an unintended pregnancy by abortion but less likely than low income women to have unintended pregnancies.

With the possible exception of socioeconomic status, participants in this study reflect national statistical trends demographically. Participants range in age from twenty-three to approximately seventy at the time of the interview, are mostly white (95%), and mostly Protestant (42%). The majority of participants had never been married at the time of their procedures (68%). I set no limits set on age at the time of the abortion or time elapsed since the procedure. Women range in age from seventeen to forty-seven at the time of their abortions, with most being in their twenties (68%), and the time elapsed since the procedure ranges from approximately eighteen months to thirty years. All of the women identified as pro-choice at the time of the interview and only one woman identified as pro-life prior to her abortion but since has changed her view to pro-choice. One woman had her abortion prior to the legalization of abortion in the United States. However, her abortion was performed in England where abortion was legal at the time. Recall of the experience did not seem difficult despite the time that had passed since the abortion. One
woman struggled slightly to remember intricate details but was quick in the recollection of her feelings and thoughts regarding her experience.

One woman had a medical abortion using RU-486 (mifepristone) while nineteen had surgical abortions. Of those nineteen, two women elected to be put under general anesthesia while the remaining seventeen were given a mild oral sedative or were not given any drug.

**Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed and coded for analysis according to themes such as religion, family and other support systems, and feminist ideology and activist behavior. Following Fielding and Schaff (2004), the interviews were analyzed using a grounded theory method in order to allow women to “develop their own narratives in response to semistructured questions that emerge in concert with the interviewer” (p.617). Furthermore, the approach used was in line with Smith’s “standpoint theory” (1987) which she describes as “…a method that, at the outset of inquiry, creates the space for an absent subject, and an absent experience that is to be filled with the presence and spoken experience of actual women speaking of and in the actualities of their everyday worlds” (p.107). The point of applying standpoint theory is to let the real experiences of women speak for themselves rather than to try and fit them into a preexisting framework that has not been designed by them or for them.

In addition, I wanted to examine several theoretical questions using semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked to tell their abortion “stories” in their own words after which time I asked general questions regarding family life, religious background, and political and/or activist viewpoints and involvement (See Appendix for
examples of questions). First, I was interested to see how religious background affects the abortion experience. For instance, do women who are raised Catholic, a religion that openly condemns abortion, have a more difficult time, emotionally or otherwise, with abortion than women who are not raised Catholic? Second, what role does support, or non-support, play in how women view their abortions? Do women with positive social support fare better after an abortion than women without? Third, how does feminist ideology or activism affect the experience of abortion and vice-versa? Are women who are strongly feminist better able to cope with abortion than those who are not? Does going through the experience of having an abortion provoke women to adopt a more feminist ideology? Lastly, I wanted to explore how women view their abortion experiences more generally. When women look at their abortions in retrospect, does their view change with time? And if so, how?

**Limitations of the Methodology**

One limitation of this study is that most of the participants were white and middle class. Although white women do make up the majority of abortion seekers and higher income women are more likely to end their pregnancies by abortion in the United States, the racially and socioeconomically homogenous nature of the sample prevents the results from being generalized. However, the diversity in women's ages, backgrounds, and the elapsed time since their abortions illustrates the complexity of individual experiences from the circumstances in which women make the choice to end their pregnancies to how they reflect upon their abortions with the passage of time.

Additionally, the small sample size as well as the sampling technique prevents these results from being generalized. Because the recruitment email was posted on two
list serves catering to academically-oriented women, a number of the participants were students (32%) or professors at colleges or universities (32%). Despite the similarities between these women academically and professionally, they still varied widely in upbringing and life experiences as well as their experiences with abortion. As this study was designed to be exploratory in nature, the sample was sufficient in acquiring a rich pool of data demonstrating how even similar groups of women can have a range of reactions to the experience of having an abortion.
CHAPTER III

THE ABORTION EXPERIENCE: FEMINIST IDEOLOGY AND ACTIVISM

Research illustrates that personal experiences, and the emotions surrounding them, often encourage or inspire people to social action by providing both the motivation to take part in social movements and a set of goals to accomplish by it (Jasper 1998). In a study examining college students' attitudes towards and commitment to the issue of abortion, Carlton, Nelson, and Coleman (2000) found that women who have personal experience with abortion are also likely to be more committed to the issue and have stronger pro-choice attitudes than those with no prior abortion experience. Likewise, Luker (1984) and Ginsburg (1989), in studies of abortion activists, found that commitment to abortion activism was often accompanied by some level of personal experience with abortion and a heightened awareness or “awakening” as a result.

Over the course of this research, I spoke with twenty women and every one of them identify as pro-choice. In addition, the vast majority (fifteen women) identify as “feminist”—some to a greater degree than others. The following examples illustrate how, for some women, the experience of having an abortion compelled them to become active in the abortion movement and/or for women’s rights more generally. Some of the women who consider themselves active in the women’s rights movement (not necessarily limited to abortion rights) said that they became so long before their abortion and discuss how this identity affected the process of deciding to have an abortion. For others, the
abortion experience served to propel them to further activism or cement their feminist beliefs.

Summer was twenty-four when I interviewed her in March 2005 and had her abortion two years earlier. At the beginning of the interview, Summer explained how her identity as a feminist affected her decision to have an abortion:

The first thing I’ll say is I’ve come into a feminist awakening through my education in college and through my experiences so, I’ve been aware of um, the situation for women in relation to abortion, in relation to uh, rights in general, so, I’ve had an opinion about what my rights are for awhile...so when it came to a point where I thought I was pregnant...when I did have the pregnancy test and I saw it, then I decided immediately like I can’t, I can’t have this child, so, and I didn’t feel shame about it, I didn’t feel upset about, that, I mean I felt upset about the decision but I didn’t feel like I was a bad person, I didn’t feel like I, I had to, like, go through that, like a lot of women I know have to go through that process of like, okay this is a moral thing, or I feel judgments about myself because of it, or I feel guilty, you know, and I, I would go through those emotions but I was really strong in knowing what my choice was and knowing that it was okay to make that choice.

Summer’s self-described “awakening” enabled her to feel confident in her decision to have an abortion. Her opinion that abortion is something that she is entitled to, and not something to be ashamed of, is akin to those women in Luker’s study who “came to feel they had a right to use abortion in order to control their own lives” (p. 118, italics in original).

Although Summer thought of herself as a feminist before she made the decision to have an abortion, she became more active after the procedure. In fact, she started a radical feminist women’s group on her college campus in the year after she graduated. The group discusses how women and men are socialized and she stated that the point of her group is to question that socialization. She said that the group is not for everybody;
however, as she believes that some women are more ready to really question our society than others and she understands why. However, she is steadfast in her own views:

I’ve always felt pretty solid in who I am and where I stand as a feminist and as a woman and as somebody that has opinions about this world that not many people share. I’m very open about my feminism. I’m very open about seeing men and seeing this society and the patriarchy for what it is and calling them out on it and asking women to question their complicity and to know that they’re not alone and to know that this is systematic, the pain we go through nine times out of ten is systematically imposed on us and so I refuse to fall into that trap of individualizing my experience.

"To be fair" to those women who may not be ready to become active in the feminist movement, or may not be ready to “question” society, Summer said, “I do a lot of things because that’s what I would expect from another woman, and it’s like, okay, if I can’t do it myself than how can I encourage other women to go there? So, if I’m not going to talk about my abortion openly and not feel...ashamed, not to feel any, any shame whatsoever about that decision or about that reality that women go through”, then, according to Summer, she can not expect other women to open up about their own experiences.

This attitude came into play not only in Summer’s work with the feminist group but also through her hobby of writing poetry, which has provided her with a platform for speaking about her own experience. Shortly after she had an abortion, Summer composed a poem about “women’s experiences but also about my experience getting the abortion...it’s, like, the first slam poem I’ve ever written and it was, like, really powerful.” Summer has shared this poem in front of several audiences and it was published in a packet put together by the woman’s group she helped organize. This act helped her get closer “to where [she] needed to get close to, to be able to feel, like, okay” about having an abortion:
I think a lot of time people have to do something quote, unquote, creative, or something that extracts emotion out and puts it out into the world so they have a voice for it now, they have, it's not just something silenced or something inside you, it's something that you kind of laid out and extracted and I think that's why it felt so healing to write the poem.

Thus, her composition and subsequent reading of this poem served a dual purpose. Summer felt her voice was important and should be heard but she was also making a statement about the right to have an abortion, and talk openly and without shame about it. By reading her own work, Summer felt she was empowering other women to possibly do the same and not feel so “silenced” themselves.

Melissa is also active on her college campus in the Northeast as a non-traditional undergraduate student. She is twenty-seven years old and had three abortions by the time she was about twenty-two. She considers herself pro-choice and “a feminist, a really radical feminist.” Melissa is active in diversity education on campus as well as women’s studies and has appeared in feminist theater productions through school, all of which took place after her abortion experiences although she does not necessarily connect her ideology to them. She was in a very abusive marriage beginning at the unusually young age of fifteen and therefore her interest in feminism might have also stemmed in part from this experience. However, she did not make a direct connection between her activist behavior and her marriage or her experiences with abortion.

Melissa believes that the larger public abortion debate fails to get to “the heart of the matter, which is women having control and making their own decisions pertaining to their own bodies.” Melissa believes the government uses the abortion issue as “a distraction from the real issues” in our country, such as class division and sexism, much like Hunter (1991) who refers to abortion as “the politics of distraction” (p.49) in his
discussion regarding America’s “culture wars”, and she does not “think society values women enough”. She strongly and firmly believes in a women’s right to choose to have an abortion and worries about the possibility of it being taken away:

I don’t know…it’s just a really heated debate and topic right now…we go through phases I feel, and eventually it’s gonna go back the other way, the pendulum’s swinging this way a little bit too much and it’s just gonna have that backlash…I don’t want it to be the beginning of it but I feel like we’re just at the beginning of this because the fact that South Dakota just lost their rights I feel that’s just symbolizing the fact that this is gonna start getting worse…but maybe it has to get worse before it gets better too, as least I feel like that’s a positive spin. I think a lot of people are apathetic because they take it for granted but I feel once that right is really threatened people will get involved because [right now] South Dakota is just somewhere over there. I feel like that’s how people feel and once it starts hitting home more, they’re gonna really get involved.

Melissa’s involvement in feminist issues and strong belief in a woman’s right to choose has also helped her to feel more empowered about her decisions and entitled to them. She does not feel guilty for deciding to have multiple abortions, which is in contrast with Luker’s finding that, “A great many pro-choice activists find multiple abortions morally troubling” and oppose it’s use “as a form of birth control”, assuming that any woman who has more than one abortion does so. According to Melissa:

The people who say, ‘oh I’m pro-choice but I don’t think it should be used as a form of birth control,’ you’re no better in my mind than the people who are saying, ‘well, they shouldn’t be getting an abortion at all because it’s wrong and you’re killing,’ because you’re really kind of perpetuating the same thing and…it shouldn’t be your [abortion opposers’] judgment, it should be more like, a woman’s choice, you know, or decision-making over her own body.

Both Summer and Melissa felt empowered and justified in choosing to have abortions partly as a result of their feminist ideologies and feel that they may have grown stronger in their beliefs and actions as a result of their decisions. Although they do not explicitly express an awareness of that connection, several of the women I interviewed
did. Unlike Summer, whose “feminist awakening” had taken place prior to facing an unwanted pregnancy, for others, such an awakening was spurred on by the experience.

For example, Meredith explained that having an abortion was precisely what “compelled [her] to be more politically active.” Prior to her abortion, Meredith said she “felt asleep” and wasn’t “thinking about anything much in particular.” When she made the choice to have an abortion “something got lifted” and she began looking at the world a little differently. Meredith’s abortion experience was “very symbolic” and “very significant” for her—“the personal became very political for me.” Since her abortion, she has done research on international family planning in her career as a college professor, spoken publicly about reproductive rights, and written many letters to newspaper editors and politicians. As Meredith said, she was able through her education and experience to come into a new way of thinking. She has tried to use what she has learned and her voice to advocate for and educate those who can not “say anything for themselves.”

Carmen looks back at her abortion as “one of the best things that ever happened” to her and as a “pivotal” experience. She said, “I think that I wouldn’t have been the person I am now had I not made this really serious decision.” After she had an abortion at age twenty, Carmen began escorting women into abortion clinics shortly after Congress enacted the Freedom of Access to Clinics Act in 1994 which prevented antiabortion demonstrators from blocking women’s access into abortion facilities. She continued to do so about once a week for four years because though demonstrators were not permitted to physically block women from entering, they were still able to demonstrate outside clinics, a tactic which some women find intimidating and disturbing.
(Cozzarelli, et al. 2000). She does not believe she would have been an escort at all if she had not had an abortion herself and feels her experience caused her to take social justice issues as well as her education more seriously.

Kelly had a similar experience after her abortion when she was in her early twenties. Though she said she had always believed in a woman’s right to have an abortion, after her own experience this changed from “a belief in my head to a belief in my whole being.” Kelly feels her abortion helped her “mature” as a feminist but at the same time, she feels she is “getting jaded” as time goes by. While at one time she had quite a bit of hope in what those active in women’s right could do (“We can change the world.”), now she looks at that attitude as “idealistic.” For Carmen and Kelly, their opinions about the rights of women, especially regarding abortion, had been thought through prior to their abortions but became stronger as a result. For others, like Tanya and Denise, they either began thinking of abortion rights as a result of their experience or changed their opinions entirely.

Tanya said before her abortion she had “never really thought about it as an issue and “didn’t need to have an opinion.” Since then, much like many pro-choice activists when faced with their own experience (Carlton, Nelson, and Coleman 2000), she has come into her own way of thinking about the right to choose and those who oppose it:

It’s my body, it’s my life, who are you [anti-choice supporters] to tell me what I should and should not do? Who are you to tell me what’s best for me? Cause obviously if I know that I can’t bring a child into this world, what good is it gonna do to this kid if we bring it here and it’s not gonna be taken care of in the way that it should? It’s not doing this child any sort of service and it’s doing it a disservice, so...it, it makes me mad, it really does...This is supposed to be America, land of the free...I don’t understand how someone can tell me what I can and can’t do. That really, really bothers me.
Tanya had an abortion at the age of seventeen but knows now that she is lucky to have had her choice before parental consent laws were put in place in her state to make the process more difficult for her:

I disagree with the parental consent because I think that if, if that were an issue, I would have had a baby at seventeen and I know that I couldn’t have handled it and it would’ve just put it on my parents’ shoulders anyways, so... And it would’ve made not a good life for a child... Even if I wouldn’t do it again now, I don’t think that choice should be taken away from some other seventeen-year-old girl that was in the same position that I was in or even some, anyone, any age.

Unlike, Tanya, Denise did have an opinion on abortion prior to having her own—she considered herself pro-life. Denise was in college when she became pregnant for the first time and said abortion was not something she would have ever considered; she ended up getting married and carrying her pregnancy to term. The pregnancy was “horrendous” and she said during it she suffered quite a few health problems which left her bedridden and unable to keep food down. Four months after giving birth to her daughter, she became pregnant again but did not think she would survive if she kept the baby. Denise said despite the fact that she did not believe in abortion she felt it was more important to make a choice that was right for her at the time.

Denise’s experience completely altered her thinking and she said she found out just how important having the right to choose is when she went through her own experience. She feels her abortion was “evolutionary” for her and considers it a “deciding factor” in her voting behavior; she refuses to vote for a candidate who is anti-choice even if she is in agreement with them on other issues, a practice known as “single-issue voting” which is generally more common among those who oppose abortion than it is among those who support it (Hout 1999). Denise “gets very angry” every time she
hears about the possibility of Roe v. Wade being overturned and thinks “no one has the
right to make the decision to have an abortion for them.”

Ruth is seventy-five years old and had an abortion at the age of forty-seven. She
was married at the time and had three teenage sons. Her abortion took place in 1978 and
shortly after she became active in women’s reproductive rights. She was involved with
NARAL and went to Washington, D.C. as part of an abortion rights campaign in which
two NARAL representatives from each state hand delivered letters to Congressmen
regarding the right to an abortion. At first, Ruth said, she tried to help others but did not
necessarily talk about her own experience with abortion; she spoke at college campuses
about women’s rights and was involved in everything from reproductive rights to
domestic abuse and sexual assault but never spoke about having an abortion herself.
“You have to realize,” Ruth said, “that back then it wasn’t, we were made to feel as if it
was something you didn’t tell people about so I didn’t want to tell people...There was a
great silence. People didn’t talk about their abortions.” She said she eventually
understood that “it’s not a private matter because everybody should speak up about
it...Since they’ve made it a matter of law and rights and government we have to talk
about it.” Like many of the pro-choice activists interviewed by Luker (1984), Ruth
wanted to “make the “unspeakable” speakable” (p.97).

In 1985, Ruth said she “didn’t mind going public” and while she had been active
in women’s issues prior to doing so, women’s reproductive rights then became the
primary focus of her attention. Through her involvement with NARAL, she was asked to
appear on a relatively popular television news show to debate abortion with an anti-
choice political representative and also spoke about her experiences on a couple of radio
talk shows. Though she is not absolutely clear what provoked the sudden change in her thinking, she said she thought it was her own abortion that “triggered” her activism and that she must have felt strongly about it because, “when [she] had the chance to become activist, [she] didn’t turn it down.” She speculated that maybe at the time of her abortion, she considered it a personal problem but the more the right to choose was threatened, the more she thought she should speak up. Ruth believes that being open about her abortion is important also because, as she said, “I don’t think anybody who hasn’t had one can feel as strongly as those of us who have.”

Ruth is still quite vocal about the abortion issue as well as her personal experience and said that if she thinks there is someone she knows who is on the anti-choice side of the debate and might be “educated”, she sometimes tells her story though not on as large a scale:

If I had my druthers, I would just be very outspoken and say, ‘damn it, every woman should have the right to an abortion’ and it should not be this whole legal mess. It should never have gotten into the courts, never become a problem with all these suits, these mostly older men have the power to say what a woman can do, I mean, and some women. But you should be able to have an abortion for any reason; I don’t care if it’s bad reason. You know, they think people have abortions for convenience or whatever, it should be legal even if some people abuse it and yes, we should try to have fewer abortions, we should have better birth control, we should have better sex education but this whole evangelical, right wing, abstinence only...You know, it just, it just, here I am, seventy-five, it still makes me furious.

Wanting to educate others or convince those on the opposing side of the debate of the rightness of an argument is quite common in abortion activists. Luker (1984) states, “Early in the process of becoming involved in the abortion issue, people on each side (pro-life and pro-choice) often feel compelled to “share the faith” or to “enlighten” the opposition” (p.2). As stated above, Ruth expressed such a compulsion and attempted to
inform those around her of her pro-choice beliefs in the hope of changing their opinion and she was not the only woman I interviewed who voiced such a concern.

Rebecca and Marie both spoke of the desire to reason or argue with anti-choice activists. When Rebecca had her abortion, she said, there were no protestors to walk by at the clinic and she is glad she did not have to face them, hear what they were saying, or see the pictures on their protest signs. Although she was not affected by such activities, since her abortion, she has felt compelled to stop anti-choice demonstrators and say:

What the f**k do you care, you know? If you’re so hell bent on saving lives then, you know, why aren’t you opposing the war in Iraq or whatever, you know, why aren’t you opposing the hunger that goes on in this country? Like, I just really want to reason with them and try to understand why this life that has nothing to do with them is so precious to them, you know, and then it’s only until I have the baby and then of course if I need assistance, ‘well, f**k you, you got pregnant!’ You know what I mean? I just want to stop and reason with them and that’s how it impacts me.

Similarly, Marie did not face protestors when she had her own abortion but has since in her work as a volunteer guard outside abortion clinics. Although she thinks some of the tactics of antiabortion demonstrators are “despicable”, she said they can not be argued with—“there is no arguing with them”—and all anyone can really do is state what they think their rights are or what the rights of women are but not hope to “get through” to anti-choice protestors.

Though Rebecca acknowledges that “reasoning” with anti-choice demonstrators may be a futile task, she has been successful in “indoctrinating” her mother into feminist ideology. When Rebecca had an abortion, she was eighteen and her relationship with her mother was strained. Her mother was a strict Catholic at the time and did not believe in premarital sex or the right to an abortion. Although she was supportive toward Rebecca through her abortion, she was still vocal about her disapproval. When Rebecca went to
college, she began taking women's studies courses and passed what she was learning onto her mother, who she says went “from a very conservative, always voting Republican straight down the ballot, anti-choice to like sort of a hardcore progressive, left feminist.” Rebecca expressed feeling “proud” of her mother for making what she saw as a very positive change in her worldview.

Rebecca has also been involved in the abortion rights movement since she had an abortion. She has acted as a lobbyist for NARAL and considers herself “a vehement choice activist.” Through her education and experience, Rebecca said she became more “understanding about abortion as a social problem as opposed to just an individual problem,” and this “really, really helped her” to deal with her own abortion. She plans to resume her involvement with NARAL, which was curtailed when she left the state she was in, when she moves back.

Emily was quite involved in activist activities on her college campus as well. As an undergraduate she participated in some pro-choice demonstrations involving wire hangers symbolizing the consequences of overturning Roe v. Wade. Emily said she had always been “sort of active” in making sure women had the right to choose and when she became pregnant, her pro-choice beliefs became more salient for her as she made her decision to have an abortion. Emily is still involved in political activism on the local and state level; however, she is not involved in women’s reproductive rights beyond basic healthcare issues, such as financial assistance for low-income women, in the area where she lives. She said she is active in the more general “liberal” or “Democrat” cause, which may in fact include abortion rights, but that abortion is not her cause, per se. However,
she still firmly believes that “people absolutely need the right to choose and that should be assured legally.”

Kate also developed a strong pro-choice perspective before she had an abortion. She said she absolutely believes in a woman’s right to choose and thinks the pro-life position is an “ignorant” one and “wasn’t something [she] would have even considered. When Kate became pregnant in her late teens, she did not question her decision to have an abortion at all. She considers herself an activist for women’s rights but believes it is connected more to being a survivor of domestic violence than to her abortion experience. Kate was married to a very abusive man for several years and broke free from her situation and became active in women’s political and social issues shortly thereafter. She later participated in a rally outside an abortion clinic on the pro-choice side. When she witnessed anti-choice demonstrators and heard their rhetoric she said it made her, “more determined that it was right for me and I should be allowed to do so...more determined that if it’s right for someone else they should also be allowed to do so...more determined that I should fight, stand up, do whatever I can to support pro-choice.”

Rachel strongly believed women should have the right to an abortion prior to her own experience as well. Rachel traveled a lot while growing up with her parents who worked for an economic development organization in lesser-developed countries. Because of her upbringing, Rachel said she has “seen people becoming pregnant for reasons beyond their decisions” and “injustice of that sort has been more present in [her] life than the injustice of someone being able to decide to terminate a life.” She has also witnessed firsthand how not being able to access abortion negatively affects the health and well-being of both women and their children. When Rachel became pregnant, she
knew she was not in a position to become a mother and terminated her pregnancy without much hesitation.

Marie was in England at the time of her abortion in 1973. She was active in the women’s rights movement both before and after her abortion and does not see her activism as a result of it. She acted as a director of a women’s health enter that performed abortions in her later years but in the late 1960s worked as a nurse in a public health facility where she said she began seeing things in a more “grassroots” and “dramatic” way. She was “somewhat” involved in pregnancy and birthing rights but said that was not where her heart was and she began working for abortion rights.

When abortion was just becoming legal in the United States, Marie worked as a driver taking women to get abortions from her home state, in which abortion was illegal, to a neighboring one in which it was not. Marie, as mentioned above, has also worked as a guard at abortion clinics helping to escort women inside and has taught higher education classes on women’s issues.

Today, Marie believes it’s possible that Roe v. Wade could be overturned and said she is “frightened” about what is currently taking place in South Dakota and Mississippi. “I honestly didn’t think we’d be fighting this battle today,” Marie said, “I really thought when Roe v. Wade passed, we knew we didn’t think it was nirvana, but we though, phew!” Now, Marie said, she thinks “we’re back to square one.” Marie emphasizes the plight of economically disadvantaged women in gaining access to abortion because “the women who have the least resources are going to suffer the most,” if the right to an abortion is taken away. Also, those women with the least resources also do not have time to be advocates for their cause because they are already too busy just
trying to live their own lives or they are unable to articulate what their issues are. In addition, she believes that women now are just less likely in general to get involved in women’s rights issues than they were when Roe v. Wade was being passed in 1973. Marie said, “I just don’t think that a lot of women today understand what it means to have reproductive choice, reproductive quote freedom...we’re not being handed anything on a silver platter and what they give us, they can take away.”

Ruth also sees the lack of involvement on the pro-choice side of the abortion debate as a problem and thinks that “a lot of young women today aren’t willing to be politically active because they think all the rights have been won, and, you know, they’re always in danger of being taken away.” Luker (1984) found a similar pattern in her research; pro-choice activists were putting less time and effort into their cause, perhaps because they did not view their circumstances as urgent as those on the opposing side. Similarly, Scott and Schumann (1988) found that those who oppose abortion show more concern and place more importance to the issue of abortion than those who support it. As for the anti-choice side’s work, Ruth said,

They’re very organized, I mean look what they’ve done in 32 years...they’ve seized the debate on their terms. We say pro-life instead of anti-choice and the media uses those terms. I mean, the media’s no help either. If you use a phrase like pro-life...instead of anti-choice, it’s a loaded word. And so is partial birth instead of intact dilation or whatever it is. It’s wrong.

Ruth said she is not sure if Roe v. Wade will be overturned in her lifetime but it is definitely something that worries her.

Marie and Ruth’s concerns about Roe v. Wade being overturned and their dismay over the lack of activism on the part of younger women may be due, at least in part, to the fact that they are both considerably older than most of the women I interviewed and had
their abortions in the early seventies; Marie even had hers prior to the legalization of abortion in the United States though it was legal in England. They got to see abortion rights, and women’s rights in general, transformed before their eyes and know how hard activists worked in order to see that happen. As stated above, those who oppose abortion have been found to be more active in fighting to see Roe v. Wade overturned and those on the pro-choice side have become somewhat complacent, thinking that the battle has been won, as Marie said. Although as illustrated by the above examples, many women I spoke with are active in women’s rights to varying degrees, others, like Julie and Denise, are not but say if they felt the right to choose was in serious jeopardy they would consider becoming activists.

While Julie does not think she has ever been anything other than pro-choice, she has not been active in the movement. However, she said she “would consider becoming an activist if it gets to the point where I really think it’s gonna, things are gonna go back to what they were [before Roe v. Wade]”, validating Melissa’s earlier point that if rights become seriously threatened, more women may get involved. Denise exercises her opinion in her voting behavior and said she has left money to a feminist health organization in her will, but she is not presently active in the abortion rights movement though she thinks that maybe she should be. She believes abortion rights are being seriously threatened and if she thought she could make a difference she would probably become more of an activist. Her daughter did some volunteer work escorting women into an abortion clinic and this made Denise proud although she said, “I can’t say I’ve ever done it.”
Clearly, viewing the world from a feminist standpoint affects how some women view their abortion experiences, both in the process of deciding to obtain an abortion and in their perception of the experience after the fact. Conversely, other women come into their own, so to speak, or become more passionate about feminism and/or in their activism as a result of their experiences. Though age does appear to play a role in the way women view abortion rights presently, those who have personally been affected by women’s rights issues are often compelled to help others in similar positions in both large and small ways regardless of their age.
CHAPTER IV

RELIGION AND THE ABORTION EXPERIENCE

According to Petchesky ([1984] 1990) the antiabortion movement began in the Catholic Church and has remained an essentially religious movement. In church services, priests and pastors in strongly pro-life faiths are likely to evoke religious guilt with their sermons and connect pro-life activities with Christian duty and the achievement of eternal salvation. Members of the Catholic Church are also sometimes urged to vote pro-life in order to demonstrate they are “good Catholics” (Tribe 1990:166). While the Catholic Church is inarguably the most visible religious voice in the public abortion debate, other faiths, such as Fundamentalist Protestants, Orthodox Jews, Mormons, and Black Muslims, have also voiced antiabortion sentiment (Cook, Jelen, and Wilcox 1993; Petchesky [1984] 1990).

In her research on both pro-choice and pro-life activists, Luker (1984) found that for pro-life activists, religion is very central in their lives, while for those who are pro-choice, it is generally unimportant or irrelevant. Antiabortion religions, particularly the Catholic Church, emphasize sex as being strictly for procreative purposes and see attempts to thwart reproduction, whether in the form of birth control or abortion, as against God’s will and even arrogant. Furthermore, religious law, such as The Ten Commandments, strictly forbids murder and since the Catholic Church believes that life begins at conception, abortion is in violation of that law. Although in the earliest debate over abortion, the Catholic Church’s position was that life did not truly begin until
“animation”, which was considered forty days after conception for males and eighty days for females, but presently, the Church’s stand is that life begins at conception (Tribe 1990).

Despite the fact that several of the women I interviewed were brought up in families that were quite religious—seven were raised Catholic, for example—only a couple of them expressed any conflict regarding their abortions in relation to their religion. For most of the women I interviewed, religion played little role, regardless of upbringing, in the abortion experience. In fact, a couple women detached themselves from the religions in which they were raised as a result of their abortions, so rather than religion affecting the abortion experience, the experience itself has affected religious behavior. For those who did feel conflicted, they have since come to terms with their experience through prayer and have achieved some peace. The following cases represent the diversity in not only the religious backgrounds of the women I spoke with, but also the variety of ways in which women view their abortions as a result.

Praying for Forgiveness

Tanya’s mother grew up in a very Catholic family and as Tanya put it, “in her world, [abortion] wasn’t an option.” Though Tanya’s mother was Catholic, Tanya actually went to a Baptist Church with her father’s mother. Her grandmother’s religion, Tanya felt, was “less strict than Catholicism,” and without all the sitting, kneeling, and standing. The church she went to was not like the churches her friends went to either. There were a lot of “hallelujahs and amens” at Tanya’s church, which she said was Southern Baptist though it was in a small New England community. She remembers abortion being talked about in church but says it was not very often. If something
happened in the news regarding abortion that was worthy of discussion, they might hear about it, but if not church dealt mostly with “preachy stuff about the Bible and not so much stuff that went on in the outside world.”

Tanya did not agree with a lot of what the Baptist church taught and was confused by the discrepancy between church teachings and what she learned in school. For example, when her school taught evolution, Tanya did not understand why the church’s story of creation was so different and wondered who made up what she learned in church. She commented that in that sense, “religion is a funny thing...an organized form of brainwash.” Tanya stopped going to church when she was about fourteen because she said she could not deal with the “hypocrisy” and with people thinking they were so much better than other people. She got no fight from her parents for not going since they were not going themselves.

Tanya’s mother found out about her abortion through Tanya’s sister who had found some paperwork Tanya had been given after having her abortion. Tanya’s sister was quite involved in the church and very strongly opposed to abortion. As Tanya said, her sister had her grandmother’s religious beliefs instilled in her. Tanya’s mother placed the paperwork her sister had shown her in the center console of the family car and later asked Tanya to run an errand. Upon doing so, Tanya noticed the paperwork and realized her mother must have put it there. Tanya said nothing about the papers and neither did her mother until later that evening when they were at the grocery store and her mother expressed disappointment that Tanya had not confided in her. Her mother said nothing more and “didn’t want to hear anymore” about it. Part of the reason Tanya did not tell her mother initially was because she was Catholic but also because “she was my Mom”.

57

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Tanya feared her mother would be disappointed in her for getting pregnant but instead Tanya faced her mother’s disappointment for not confiding in her. Tanya still does not go to church and her grandmother has since passed away. During our interview, Tanya elaborated on how she now views her experience with abortion and how she reconciles it with her religious upbringing:

I knew that the church thought [abortion] was wrong and I also knew I was taught God forgives and obviously I have my reasons and hopefully, in the end, God can forgive me for my reasons because I couldn’t bring a child into that particular environment at that particular time. It doesn’t mean that I, that I never would, but I think I saved the life of some poor, miserable child. I couldn’t have given it anything—not any kind of life it would’ve deserved anyway. Supposedly, God forgives and you shouldn’t be made to feel like you’re wrong for making a choice that best suits you.

Kristina, like Tanya, was brought up in a practicing Catholic family; both of her parents are still active in the Catholic Church and the family went to church regularly while she was growing up. Kristina also attended Catholic schools which is where she believes she came to be aware of the Catholic Church’s views on abortion. Although she doesn’t remember hearing about abortion specifically in church or at school, she thinks she found out in the context of sexual education in which there was quite a bit of discussion of proper sexual behavior and the consideration of conception as a “precious gift” that one should not be casual about.

Feeling like she never had much choice when it came to her religion, Kristina gave up Catholicism while in college when she says she went through a period of trying to find herself by exercising freedom to explore other religions in her own way and on her own terms. Throughout this exploration Kristina never stopped believing in God and after attending several different churches, what she termed a “Christian buffet”, she decided to become a Christian because she knew it was where she belonged. Kristina
remarked that “it’s amazing how different religion or spirituality can feel when you are with a different group of people with a different set of norms.” Though she identifies as Christian, she does not claim membership in “any one organized party” of Christianity, she just knows it is what is comfortable for her and that belief has only strengthened over time, especially since moving to Utah in recent years. As Kristina put it, if you’re not a Mormon in Utah, you cling to your religion even tighter than you normally would and she considers hers to be more important now than ever before. Although she had her abortion before she became a Christian, she said she knows she is now participating in a religion that views abortion as wrong. Her abortion did not affect her view of the Catholic Church; even though she thinks any guilt she has felt has been a result of her religious background, she always had a lot of issues with Catholicism and it is not why she left the religion.

When Kristina started attending church as a Christian, she also began reexamining her experience with having an abortion which she said she had partly involuntarily repressed and partly intentionally tried to forget or deny by “sweeping it under the rug” in order to avoid dealing with the guilt and sadness she felt. Kristina acknowledged this was “probably not a very healthy way to deal with any aspect of life, especially an unwanted pregnancy” and so more recently she has tried to remember the details of her experience and really reflect on it. Additionally, her move to Utah where, according to Kristina, there is quite a bit of pro-life talk, a strengthening of her religious faith in God, and her changing academic environment may have initiated her deeper examination and encouraged her to think more deeply about her experience. She believes that regardless of her feelings about it, it is a part of who she is now.
At the time of her abortion, Kristina does not remember thinking that abortion itself was necessarily sinful but she has questioned that more as time has gone on. Part of her, she says, might have felt like she was taking a life at the time, which is "certainly debatable," she says, and she feels this could be where some of the guilt she has felt since the experience came from. Or, Kristina said, it could be that she feels she was selfish in the way she dealt with her unintended pregnancy. She stated that there were other options available to her, such as carrying the pregnancy to term and then giving the baby up for adoption but in the end, she said, "My irresponsibility produced a child I was willing to kill." As she puts it, Kristina is still not sure whether or not she believes that is what she did but the thoughts are there nonetheless. She said she knows her parents would have supported her had she gone to them and they had the resources available so that carrying her pregnancy to term would have been possible financially.

She commented that terminating the pregnancy was, in some ways, an easy way out of a bad situation and this is what seems selfish. By having an abortion, Kristina would not have to explain anything to anyone and it would all be over within a few hours. Kristina questions where she got the idea that having an abortion was a selfish decision and wonders if it might be due in part to the way she has heard abortion discussed both in the media as well as in some of the churches she has attended in her religious exploration. Kristina has been to churches where the big issues—homosexuality, abortion, for example—are discussed. For example, at one church she went to a prayer was said asking that RU-486 (the "abortion pill") would not become available to women. Kristina said she opened her eyes and raised her head instantly and was unable to continue praying because she felt hypocritical and uncomfortable with "this sort of glaring
contradiction between my life experiences and my new faith.” The last church she went to wasn’t like that; they were more concerned with the basics—things like being a good person and treating other people well. Over time, Kristina believes she must have been affected by such talk and said, “It’s got to have affected my memory of that [her abortion] and gotten me to question my judgment.” When she heard herself say she took the easy way out, she remarked, “That sounds like rhetoric to me,” because her own words sounded much like the claim of those who oppose abortion that women use abortion to avoid the responsibility of raising a child or as a ‘convenient’ solution.

In addition to thinking more deeply about her experience, Kristina has prayed and said she “confessed that sin to God rather than to a priest...if this was something that was wrong and sinful then I ask for grace.” Despite her knowledge of the way abortion is viewed in Christian faiths, Kristina found prayer to be a positive way to reconcile her feelings. She was a bit surprised to hear herself refer to abortion as a sin and remarked that that must be how she thinks about it. However, she says, “In my mind, there is no sin greater or worse than another and we all mess up...I’ve sort of tried to take the stance that it’s for God to judge, it’s for God to evaluate. It’s not for me to do.” Kristina said she also knows she should not judge other people either—“It’s their life and their choice, whether they have had no abortions or eight.”

Praying about it has brought Kristina a sense of peace through acknowledgment of her own experience which she says she avoided for quite some time as a defense mechanism. Through it all, Kristina said she has realized that:

Hey, even if it’s not the best decision, our lives are riddled with bad decisions, and we can’t second guess everything. I did it, I made that choice, it’s a part of my life and I have to accept that and now it’s time to move on and not be
so afraid to acknowledge that it happened to you, not be so embarrassed to say that you’re pro-choice even though you’re a Christian.

Thinking about it has also helped her to get a better handle on who she is, what her life history means, and where she stands on certain things.

Religion as Irrelevant

Summer, a twenty-four year old college graduate, believes she has evolved the way she has because she did not have any influence of organized religion in her life. Nobody in her immediate family is religious though she was born into a nominally Protestant family. When Summer was relatively young, her parents divorced and soon thereafter her father remarried and had two sons. Around this time, he started attending church with her two half brothers. Mostly, Summer thought they went to church to have a time in the week to reflect and that was one way she could see that religion had something good to offer.

She knows from her education and watching the news that the Catholic and Protestant religions hold negative opinions about women and abortion and she thinks it’s hard to avoid internalizing the cultural standards, generalizations, and stereotypes that are created and perpetuated by them such as the role of women in society, as Melissa mentioned, and the idea that women who have abortions must be promiscuous. However, religion has never been strong in her life overall.

Tara grew up in Canada and was also raised Protestant. However, unlike Summer, she did attend church with her family on a regular basis and although no one talked about abortion and despite the fact that she did not live in a terribly small community, there were well-defined community norms and “everyone knew it [abortion]
was probably wrong”; it was “a bad thing to do” and no upstanding citizen would. Tara’s religious upbringing has not affected the way she views her own abortion experience but she does find it interesting that anti-choice arguments and rhetoric are often religiously based.

Carmen was raised Catholic and attended church regularly until she was about twelve years old. When she was between eight and ten she said she started arguing with her parents and complaining about being made to go to church; she told her parents church was boring, she hated it, and she no longer wanted to go. Children in her parish were confirmed at twelve rather than sixteen which is the general norm in Catholicism and Carmen said she thought they did that to “get them” before they were old enough to object. It was not until after this early confirmation that Carmen was permitted to stop going to church. In fact, her whole immediate family stopped attending. She said that is also about the time her parents started having marital problems and were too preoccupied with arguing with each other to argue with her brother and her about church or to bother going themselves. Her mother returned to church soon after she was diagnosed with cancer about ten years later, which Carmen says helped her cope with her illness, but Carmen remained skeptical of the church and did not return.

Carmen described her mother, who has since passed away as a result of her cancer, as being a liberal Catholic—she has gay and lesbian friends and is also pro-choice; she made up her own mind about things, according to Carmen, but somehow found solace in her religion. Her grandmother, on the other hand, is still a very strict Catholic who Carmen said, “can’t make up her own mind; her mind is made up for her.”
Whatever the Pope mandates, Carmen said, is where her grandmother stands—"She tows the Catholic party line."

Carmen also attended Catholic schools. When she was in seventh grade, she remembers what she called "pro-life activists" being brought into the school to talk to her class about abortion. They showed a graphic and disturbing film depicting women's negative experiences with abortion. The film also contained footage of what Carmen described as "ground up fetuses". The images were intended to shock the children and they did; Carmen said they have stuck with her all her life.

Despite her strong Catholic background, Carmen said she did not consider religion at all when making her choice to have an abortion and has not felt the least bit guilty for the choice she made. It was the best choice for her because of the circumstances she was in at the time; Carmen was young, had little financial stability, and she and her boyfriend were in the process of breaking up. Carmen believes if she had to make the choice again she would do so without any trepidation, moral or otherwise.

Sam stated that her mother identifies herself as a Catholic, though she only attended church on Easter and Christmas when Sam was growing up and has not been to church in ten years. Since her abortion, Sam has had a son and he was not baptized. Her mother thought she was evil for not doing so. Sam said her mother "doesn't follow the church but she picks and chooses the things that she wants to grab onto and says 'well, if you don't do this then, you know, you're a bad Catholic'."

Sam, like Carmen, attended Catholic school from elementary school through high school for thirteen years in all. So she could go, Sam said her mother sent money envelopes from the church so it would appear they were participating members but she
was basically lying to them because she went to church only twice a year. Besides attending church on Christmas and Easter growing up, Sam said, she attended masses through school but that was the extent of her religious experience. She does not remember hearing any talk of abortion at all in elementary school and is not even sure it was discussed in high school. Sam remarked that issues like abortion were not discussed at her school and they “dealt with them by avoiding them”. However, it was in high school that Sam says she became aware of certain positions the Catholic Church had that she didn’t agree with, such as the church’s views on sex before marriage and birth control.

By that point in her life, Sam said, she knew she was not really Catholic; she did not follow what the Church taught, she did not believe in it, and knew she did not have any deep faith. Her family’s commitment to Catholicism was not really there either so that helped Sam detach herself more easily from the church than she might have otherwise. Sam did not think about her religious background at all when she became pregnant and decided to have an abortion: “I didn’t think about sin or evil or going to hell or any of those things or that I was breaking some religious rule.” The only sadness or conflict she experienced had more to do with her life and whether or not she was making the right decision. Sam does not consider herself Catholic at all anymore; in a way she would identify as spiritual, but maybe not even that. Sam believes:

There’s an energy about this world, kinda like karma, things come around, if you’re meant to have something, you’ll have it. There’s nobody up there that’s judging you. I don’t feel that way. I don’t believe that because you don’t believe in my religion then you’re gonna go to our Hell. I don’t believe these religions that all bang heads against each other.
She has no affiliation with any religion although mentions that if she had to pick one, she might choose Buddhism.

Rejection of Religion

Melissa’s grew up with a “Bible Belt Catholic mother” who was “very strict”. Melissa was forced to go to church with her mother as a child but said she rejected church at a young age because even then she was aware of the church being oppressive and unfair and she didn’t agree with its “gender rules”. She ended up giving her mother such trouble about going that her mother gave up trying to force her to attend. When Melissa was twelve, she started going to what she identified simply as a “Christian” church with one of her friends. Shortly after, her mother also left the Catholic Church due to problems with her mother that Melissa did not elaborate on and she too switched to the Christian church Melissa had been attending with her friend.

Melissa said she was “90% sure” the church never talked about abortion during services though she imagined they must have taken an antiabortion stance. Ironically, when Melissa was eighteen, it was a woman from the church who, after she found out that Melissa was pregnant, asked her if she had considered having an abortion. It was this encounter, Melissa said, that “started planting [the idea] in my mind”. Melissa spoke of having a rather sheltered childhood, especially when it came to sexual education and had not thought of abortion as an option prior to speaking the woman from the church. Her mother, on the other hand, still does not know that Melissa got pregnant and had an abortion.

Melissa’s father had two children from a previous marriage and at one point Melissa’s children were staying with one of her half-siblings. This relative was very
Christian and Melissa said because of that she wasn’t allowed to see her children while they were staying there because Melissa was not living her life in a way they agreed with; she had been divorced and Melissa’s life was rather unstable at the time.

Melissa ended up having three abortions over the course of about four or five years. The first took place when Melissa was eighteen and not yet divorced from her husband. She obtained the second and third abortions approximately three and four years later when she was involved with a man she met after her divorce. The third time Melissa had an abortion, she was not sure which of two men the father was—her boyfriend or another man she had gotten involved with when she and her boyfriend were going through a rough time. The man she had gotten involved with was also “very Christian” and did not want her to terminate the pregnancy. He wanted her to have the baby and give it up for adoption but she did not want to go through the pain and trauma of delivering the child. She said this man was so traumatized by her abortion that he was permanently affected and to this day mutual acquaintances tell her that “he’s not right”. When asked if she thought this was because of his religious beliefs, without hesitating, Melissa said, “Yes, I do.”

Today, Melissa thinks that her religious upbringing may have affected her choice to have her abortions because she felt Catholicism was so extreme she rejected the church’s ideas outright and became more liberal as a result. She said she doesn’t think society values women enough in general and she believes this devaluation stems from religious traditions that emphasize women’s subservient place in the family, as well as society, in relation to men and regard childbirth and rearing as the fundamental roles and responsibilities of women.
Meredith comes from Catholic family that she said was not strict in the way they practiced their religion. Meredith did attend church every week with them, participated in religious education (CCD), and went through the sacraments of Communion, Confession, Confirmation, etc. However, at the time of the abortion, Meredith did not consider herself to be a “huge practicing Catholic”. When she was in graduate school, Meredith said, she stopped going completely though she had been moving away from the Catholic Church since the time of her abortion when she was about twenty years old. She said her decision to leave the Church was not entirely because of her abortion experience but the experience had started her thinking about it.

When she made her decision to have an abortion, she said she did not really consider her religion. When it came to church, she said she just went and maybe had some kind of relationship with God, but that was it. According to Meredith it “wasn’t really until afterwards [after the abortion], you know, with thinking about, you know, how just a lot of what they had to say was very hypocritical,” and that fact made her think even more about things. She had never heard abortion mentioned in her own church growing up but she remembered hearing about what the Church considered to be morally wrong and knew, for example that divorce was wrong according to the church. When she attended a Catholic High School graduation she said the priest who delivered the graduation speech also spoke about the moral ramifications of abortion. Meredith said it was the only time she ever heard it mentioned by a priest and she was surprised that it happened at a graduation of all places. Meredith also remembered knowing that the church took a harsh stance on some moral issues and that people could be excommunicated from the church. She never feared that would happen to her but
knowing the church's position, she decided that it would probably be best never to tell her family or her boyfriend's family—also Catholic. In regard to not telling the families, Meredith said, "They just don't really think much for themselves sometimes," and neither do a lot of Catholics in her opinion. Despite this view, Meredith said she does realize that there are a lot of more liberal Catholics who "pick and choose" what to take away from the Church but do not really agree with everything the church says. She said she did not think her mother did either but apparently she experienced a shift in her thinking as Meredith got older and became "more fundamental" in her views.

Meredith did talk about abortion in general with her mother, though Meredith does not remember the context of that conversation, and her mother said she never would have considered abortion for herself. However, Meredith still had the impression that her mother had a generally liberal mindset and would approve of abortion when it came to other people even if it might be unacceptable for herself. However, Meredith said something must have happened (though she is not sure what) to change her mother; she became more fundamental in her thinking all of a sudden and strongly disapproved of abortion.

Meredith has been unaffiliated with the Catholic Church for a number of years now. When I asked her why she detached herself from the Church, Meredith said, "I just felt like a lot of my beliefs didn’t match, you know, and I had been moving away from the Church...The only reason why I had gone back to church at one point was cause I was asked to be the godmother for one of my nieces." She had to get a letter from some church saying she was a parishioner so she attended a church long enough to acquire one. She explained to her sister that she would be happy to be a godmother to her daughter but
she should know that she would try to teach her niece to think for herself and also that she would not necessarily be promoting the Catholic Church’s ideas.

Before her abortion and throughout her Catholic upbringing, Meredith said she did not really have an opinion about abortion but that she “kind of had the general feeling, just kind of thinking that it only happened to bad people. You know, you just don’t think it happens to everybody.” Other than that, Meredith had not really thought about it at all. About three years after her abortion, Meredith became pregnant again. She and her partner decided to get married and debated about marrying in the Catholic Church but instead eloped. She ended up having a miscarriage and said she felt a lot of guilt and pain when that happened and “wondered if it was punishment” for her abortion. Meredith and her husband are still together and his family is still unaware of their unintended pregnancy and Meredith’s subsequent abortion.

Running the Gamut of Religious Experience

Rebecca’s mother and father were Catholic and indeed when her father was younger he even considered joining the priesthood. However, he ended up getting turned on to LSD in the 1960s and “dropped the heavy religious aspect”. Rebecca was raised Catholic and though her family went to church every week she described it as more of a “façade” and said it really did not go very deep. However, her mother made sure she went to Confession and followed all the rules but they were not really heavily into their religion. Rebecca was involved in religious education up until it was time for her to be confirmed. As Rebecca put it:

When I was going to be confirmed, I was very inquisitive and I would go to these classes and I would ask all these questions and they didn’t like it. They actually told me to shut up one day and when my mom picked me up that day
from the whatever, Sunday school or I don’t know what it was—for confirmation—I told her what they had done and that I didn’t want to go back there and she said, ‘fine, you don’t have to go back’. So they [her parents] were supportive that I didn’t want to pursue their faith.

Rebecca also went to a Catholic school for girls for nine years until she was ‘set free’ when she was in tenth grade. She laughed about when she used to attend high school parties and the boys in the public school would get excited “because the girls from the school that I had left, the Catholic all girls school, would show up at these parties cause they put out and had the best drugs and almost every single one of them had multiple abortions…and now they’re all happy homemakers and they have three kids and they’re all anti-choice. I love it, they’re all anti-choice. Ridiculous.”

Rebecca has experimented with other religions since leaving the Catholic Church. She explored Witchcraft (Wicca) most heavily but she also read Buddhist texts. She even considered studying the sociology of religion and focused on cults for a while in college, partly because her sister had been a member of a cult for a while. When asked if she was religious at all now, Rebecca said she is a “recovering Catholic”.

Rebecca’s mother was “very old school” and did not believe in or have premarital sex and was also anti-choice. Rebecca’s mother was against abortion; she thought it was not right, that it was taking a life, and if a person acts irresponsibly they should pay for their mistakes. But surprisingly, when Rebecca told her mother she was pregnant, her mother responded in a very affirming way. She told Rebecca it was her body, her life, and her choice; if she wanted to have an abortion, her mother would fully support it. Rebecca said it helped that the man she was seeing at the time was “a loser” and her mother knew that if she did carry the pregnancy to term that man would be in at least
Rebecca’s life for a very long time. Her mother was the second person Rebecca told and despite her objections she supported Rebecca through the whole experience.

Rebecca said no matter what she would never tell her grandmother on her father’s side who she is very close to otherwise. She said her grandmother is an extremely religious woman who does everything by the book and talks to God “all the time.”

Rebecca’s parents were divorced when Rebecca was thirteen and shortly thereafter Rebecca found out her father was gay and also that he was practicing Santeria, which Rebecca described as a “voodoo, Afro-Caribbean religion” in which members participate in animal sacrifice and other rituals. Her father passed away when she was about twenty-one and although he had not been a practicing Catholic for quite some time he did have Catholic Last Rites before his death but Rebecca said he “was much more complex than that”.

Rebecca’s mother is now what Rebecca calls “very spiritual, but not religious”. She still practices Catholicism “in her own unique way” and considers her home a church, not because she has altars set up inside or anything, Rebecca said, but that she is just “spiritual about it and less about the big days and going to mass and being seen at the church.” Her mother is also very supportive of others’ spiritualities regardless of what faith they are involved in. Rebecca said her mother has really turned toward her own faith especially through the long transition after her divorce from Rebecca’s father. When Rebecca approached her about being pregnant and wanting to have an abortion, she was in a phase of “praying a lot and believing in God and guiding her decisions by faith”.

72

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Rebecca said she experienced a real sense of loss when she had her abortion but it was more a sense of losing some part of herself and her innocence rather than the loss of a child. She worried that she was going to Hell, or that God had really wanted her to have a baby and that was what was supposed to happen since “everything happens for God’s reasons”. She says she also experienced some guilt. She felt a little guilty that she never told the man she was with at the time and also some guilt over having had her mother go through the whole process of having an abortion with her even though she had such strong moral objections. In addition, she said, “I hate to say it but I think the religion really creeps in and it does a number on me.” She said she has thought about it a lot and that she has decided that a lot of her guilt is wrapped up in her religious background and “whether I would go to Hell or not and then, of course, if you’re going to Hell that means you’re a bad person and that I’m a bad person because this happened, and I sorta was, I had unprotected sex, I was bad, I shouldn’t have done that.” She felt awful for having unprotected sex not only because of the pregnancy but also for other reasons that she said “hit so close to home” when her father became ill; he was diagnosed with AIDS and Rebecca felt to have unprotected sex knowing the consequences her father faced was irresponsible of her.

Julie went to a Congregational church with her mother (her father never went, she said) and also attended religious school on Sundays for a few years. Julie described her religion as being not really “rigorous right and wrong, you’ll-go-to-hell type thing” and says it was more “abstract”. No religious views were really “drummed into her head” and she does not remember the church taking any position on abortion.
Julie had two abortions, the first one when she was twenty-two. She said the decision was fairly easy and straightforward one but her partner, a man who she “really liked” at the time did not take it as lightly. He was from more of a Catholic background than she and was a little surprised by her choice. He did come to accept it and was supportive of her.

Rachel had two abortions and both of those were in Nicaragua notwithstanding the fact that it is “quite a Catholic country” and at the time allowed abortions only for therapeutic reasons though it was not specified what “therapeutic” meant exactly. She explained that in the 1980s, the government that was in place, though still Catholic, implemented some laws that pulled away from the Church’s beliefs somewhat; they began allowing unilateral divorce and were more liberal concerning women’s rights. At this point, Rachel said, it became easier to obtain an abortion because though it might have been illegal to obtain an abortion for any reason, there were more cases in which it would be permitted and less effort was being put into persecuting those who obtained them. Now, the government is back to the way it was before, basically, and the laws in place are set up to really persecute those involved with abortion and in short, make it almost impossible to obtain one. Though there are clear cut laws and beliefs on abortion, there are not really any antiabortion campaigns or protests like there are in the United States which Rachel remarked seem to always involve anti-choice demonstrators with excerpts from the Bible printed on them.

Religion did not affect her decision to have her abortions and despite the political climate in Nicaragua, she found it quite easy to navigate her way through the system and locate a provider once she had made a connection. This was definitely made easier by
the fact that her boyfriend’s brother was a doctor who helped put her in touch with someone who would be willing to perform an abortion. However, Rachel said she also spoke with another doctor who seemed willing so it may not have been that difficult without her fortunate connection.

Rachel was not raised with any organized involvement in religion. Her parents were in youth religious organizations as children and as adults were members of a religious “development organization” helping people in various parts of the United States and the world with economic and social issues. Religion was not the group’s focus, however, and that influence disappeared altogether after awhile though the organization remained.

Rachel has two brothers that have become members of two different churches since they became adults. Rachel believes one brother is a Unitarian who goes to church pretty regularly and has participated in some activities through the church. The other brother is now a member of a new Christian religion, according to Rachel, the type that holds services in high school gyms and actively tries to recruit new members. He is in church two or three times a week and is attempting to become a youth pastor. This brother’s religion also holds “quite conventional views on women and men and whatever,” as do he and his wife. When they were married, there was one set of vows for him and a separate set for her that stated “the woman should follow the man even if she knows he’s wrong.” Both her brothers are younger than her and adopted their faiths after she left home for college. Rachel said she and her parents “are up in the air about what to make of it.” Because of their views now, Rachel said it’s doubtful she would ever tell either one of them about her experience with abortion.
Rachel is not at all religious now. She does celebrate Christmas as a holiday and did attend church with her brother’s family this past year although she is sure no one in the rest of her family wanted to go.

Kelly grew up in the South and said she considered her family “rural Southern Christian”. She went to a Methodist church as a child and remarked that her church was very “white bread”, plain, and “not exciting spiritually or politically”. She has no recollection of abortion ever being addressed in any church services. Around the time she went to college, Kelly took a break from religion altogether. She now attends an Episcopalian church on a regular basis. She has not experienced any conflict regarding her religious upbringing and her decision to have an abortion.

Kelly’s parents are divorced and her father has since remarried. Her mother and stepmother both still practice their religions but her father does not. She describes her parents as embracing what she calls “conservative Christian politics” but not “right-wing evangelical politics.” Kelly said they are “anti-choice”, especially her father, and illustrated her point by sharing a story about her family cat. When the cat was taken to the vet to be spayed, it was discovered to be pregnant. Although her parents still went through with the procedure, they felt bad ending the cat’s pregnancy knowingly and intentionally. Although her father has clear anti-choice views, Kelly said he would never advertise it by placing bumper stickers on his car or becoming active in any movement. However, if one were to chat with her father for any length of time, his views would probably become apparent.

Some time after her abortion, Kelly came out as a lesbian. Kelly says though her coming out happened after her abortion, the two events are not related to each other.
one point, she developed a relationship with a woman pastor in her church who considered herself “pro-life”. Kelly remarked that in the early stages of that relationship she confided in her partner about her experience and there was some tension as a result; Kelly’s partner did not readily accept that Kelly had an abortion. It was an issue between them that they had to work through but Kelly said she feels it was good for her partner “because she got to see what an abortion story is really like and...it might have helped change some of her views on abortion” and make her more understanding of what others go through in facing an unintended pregnancy and making the choice to have an abortion. The experience was also helpful for Kelly. She said that telling her partner her story was emotionally cathartic; she had vivid memories of feeling trapped and scared in relation to becoming pregnant that came to the surface as she talked. Discussing those feelings helped Kelly feel a sense of relief since she was able to express how she felt to someone she cared about and then let the feelings go.

Kate was raised “culturally” as a Lutheran but her Swedish Lutheran family was not very religious. She did go to church on and off throughout her childhood but said it was “more off than on.” She was in confirmation classes as a teenager and did not like them at all. Her parents told her she could drop out on one condition: She had to visit other churches to see if any felt good to her. Her parents were not concerned as much with what specific religion Kate chose as long as she had some kind of “spiritual base”. In her search, Kate attended a synagogue, and Catholic, Unitarian, and Methodist churches. She does not remember hearing any talk about abortion in any of them but said she did not spend much time in any one. She ended up giving up looking around for a suitable religion and came home one day telling her parents that she had decided that she
was Bahai. They said that was fine with them and left her alone about religion from that point. At this point in her life, Kate considers herself spiritual though not religious.

Kate was unhappy at home while growing up and got married at eighteen to a man that was extremely abusive. Because she knew his mother’s beliefs were far more conservative than those of her own mother and she was a Christian, Kate said she never told her husband or her family about her experience with abortion that had happened approximately a year before she was married. She did end up having two children with her now ex-husband and neither he nor his family ever found out she had an abortion.

Kate volunteered to be on the pro-choice side of a protest at a Houston abortion clinic where she came face to face with anti-choice protestors for the first time who were holding signs depicting “dismembered fetuses”. She remembered thinking she had been lucky not to have to deal with protestors when she went for her abortion and felt bad for the women who did. What enraged her most was that one of the protestors she saw was a minister. It reminded her of something her mother had said to her and she was not sure of the exact quote but it was something like, “You should be careful how you behave—sometimes you’ll be the only Bible someone ever reads.” Kate remembered that as she looked at the minister and thought that if he were the only Bible she had ever heard of she would have thought that “Christianity was evil”.

Seeing that minister solidified Kate’s anti-religious views, according to her and “consolidated [her] anti-Fundamentalist Christian views altogether.” Some of her views on organized religion were based on the anti-choice position taken by a lot of religions but also due to people like Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Baker (and those like them) who used the fundamentalist Christian religion as a tool to exploit others or control others.
Kate’s opinion, people like that took people’s money and tried to shape social and political ideology for the purposes of controlling people. Despite this dismal view of religion, Kate said she wanted to believe that there were other kinds of religious people out there, that it was not a universal phenomenon she was witnessing:

...that there were sincere, genuine, goodhearted people of whatever faith whose agendas weren’t about controlling or vilifying me...that you could be a person of deep spiritual faith without condemning others. I was just so repeatedly disillusioned in that area. I still think I look for that, frankly, the people who I think are, you know, true to their religious beliefs, whatever they may be, but don’t condemn others. I’m always really excited if I think I’ve seen a glimmer of that somewhere.

Both of Emily’s parents are ordained Presbyterian ministers and she was in church “all the time” while growing up. She described the Presbyterian faith as being quite open from a religious perspective, more so than other religions, as evident from the fact that women have been permitted to be ordained ministers. Emily thinks the church has more of a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy when it comes to abortion and they are generally socially progressive. There have been what Emily described as ‘schisms’ in the Presbyterian faith, however—churches that are more conservative and do not believe women should be ordained, for example—but she is not sure if they have ever come out with any statement claiming a position on abortion. Different congregations have different levels of conservativism but Emily said she “has issues with organized religions” but overall, “of the organized religions, Presbyterianism is pretty chilled out.”

What bothers Emily most about organized religion are “some of the unchristian ways people act when getting wound up in the politics of the church and the community of the church.” She said that because her parents were ministers she got to see a lot about the churchgoers that one might not otherwise see and it made her a little jaded.
According to Emily, “the people that tried the most to be upright often turned out to be the ones doing the most hurtful things to friends and family.” Additionally, Emily stated:

I don’t really gain any affirmation or consolation from being in a group of people and professing my allegiance to a certain value system. I consider myself a spiritual person but it makes me nervous to have to express that in some sort of group setting.

Emily’s mother is currently a Chaplin and her father is a Minister of his own church. Emily does not attend church anymore except when she visits her parents and goes with them. She stopped going right around her junior year in high school when she became an exchange student in Finland. When she came back to the United States, her family ended up moving to New York and she never went back to church; while her mother was preaching and her father was off visiting churches, Emily says she slept in.

Emily found out she was pregnant while living in Finland and subsequently moved to Sweden to work. She had just gotten involved in a relationship less than a month before and although the relationship later became quite serious, at the time she and her partner were uncertain about their future together and not in any position to have a child. While she was in Sweden she got quite upset about her abortion and called her parents to tell them, both of whom were very supportive. From their reactions to her experience, Emily assumes both are pro-choice; her parents have been active politically and involved in social justice issues through their churches so it may be a combination of both a sense of protection of their daughter as well as larger political beliefs. Emily does not feel her religious background impacted her experience of her abortion although she was surprised to have such an emotional reaction to it which she thinks now may have been a result of her unfamiliar surroundings and the fact that her life was generally unsettled at the time.
Clearly, women's experiences with religion sometimes play a major role in determining the way they view their abortions. Although some of the women I spoke with expressed that religion neither affected, nor was affected by, their abortions, others recognized a distinct connection between them and the way they experienced religion throughout their lives. While some women reject their religions due to the conflict between what they are taught through religion and what they believe to be true for them as feminists and/or women who have had abortions, like Summer and Melissa, others find ways of reconciling their religious beliefs with their experience of abortion, most of the time, simply by asking for forgiveness.
Abortion, though legal in the United States for more than thirty years, is still not openly discussed. According to Panuthos and Romeo (1984), women are socially constrained from expressing grief or asking for support in regard to their abortions since abortion is viewed as a choice and not an uncontrollable event that takes place in one’s life, such as a miscarriage, for example. Similarly, Joy (1985) argues that our society assumes that women who choose to have abortions have nothing to grieve. However, the circumstances under which some women decide to have an abortion are themselves sometimes so constraining that it may seem there is no other choice but abortion.

Because there are such strong cultural sanctions in the United States against being unmarried and pregnant as well as having an abortion, the amount of social support a woman feels she receives while going through the abortion experience is very important. In a review of the research on the psychology of abortion, Coleman, et al. (2005) found that even if a woman approves of abortion in the abstract, her personal decision may be made much more difficult if she perceives or expects her peers or partner to disapprove of her actions. Women often expect to face not only conflicting emotions within themselves regarding their decision to have an abortion, but also possible negative reactions and even harassment from others whether friends, families, or even strangers such as antiabortion demonstrators at clinics (Major and Cozzarelli 1992). Some women fear they will face ostracism from their families and so choose to keep their experience to
themselves, especially if abortion is openly condemned by the family (Leland 2005; Panuthos and Romeo 1984).

In a study using data collected from over five hundred women who had first-trimester abortions, Major and Cozzarelli (1992) found that non-support, in the form of such things as harassment, ostracism, or criticism as mentioned above, for example, is more detrimental to women who have abortions than not having any support at all, whether involving family, friends, or one's partner. Perceived non-support can trigger feelings of shame, guilt or humiliation that may last for years if women are not able to work through them openly due to the stigma surrounding abortion (Fielding and Schaff 2004; Panuthos and Romeo 1984). For instance, if social outlets for coping with feelings of grief or loss are unavailable to women, negative responses to the experience of abortion, such as depression or feelings of guilt and/or shame, are more likely to occur (Joy 1985).

Women who do receive support from their partners, friends, and/or families, however, are more likely to have a positive or neutral emotional reaction to the experience of having an abortion (Coleman, et al. 2005). Major and Cozzarelli (1992) surveyed over five hundred women who had first trimester abortions in Buffalo, New York and found that social support, especially from one's partner, is very important in helping women get past the stress of facing an unwanted pregnancy and choosing abortion in a climate as politically charged as that of the United States. In the same study, Major and Cozzarelli found that social support increases the possibility that women will feel more able to effectively cope with the abortion experience and thus are more likely to be well-adjusted following the experience. Those who have more support
also anticipate fewer negative consequences after their abortions than women with little or no support.

The following cases illustrate some of the ways in which women are or are not supported through their abortion experiences by their families, friends, and partners and how those experiences vary as a result.

*Family Support*

Summer, who was twenty-two when she discovered she was pregnant and made the choice to have an abortion, emphasized her close and open relationship with her mother, whom she described as “hugely liberal, like, beyond liberal” as compared to her other family members who are more conservative, from the beginning of the interview:

...my mom has always been very open with allowing me to make decisions about my body and being clear about what happens with women’s bodies and things like that so it’s never been something that I’ve had to, like, whether it has to do with getting your period or anything else, it’s, like, nothing I’ve had to feel shame about or any of that. So when it came to a point that I thought I was pregnant...I knew I would not be able to have the child...and I didn’t feel shame about it, I didn’t feel upset about that. I mean, I felt upset about the decision but I didn’t feel like I was a bad person...

Summer’s relationship with her mother not only helped her through the process of making her decision to have an abortion, it also carried her through the experience itself. Summer was accompanied by her mother to the clinic where the procedure was performed and Summer’s eyes welled when she recalled the support she received from her mother after her abortion:

So, I went downstairs [at the clinic] and I was still really upset, I was still crying, you know, and I still felt really hollow and empty and, you know, I’m just so lucky to have my mom because she was in the car and she looked at me and she’s like, ‘you’re the bravest woman I know.’ And it was just so beautiful to have somebody there that, like, got it or saw you for who you were and it still makes me cry to, like, think about it.
Summer also says that her mother influenced her throughout her life to believe that she “could do absolutely anything...you know, go to college and be anything [she wants to] be” and that her choices in life were not limited to fulfilling the role of being a mother. Summer comments that for some women who do not have such a strong relationship with their mothers, or who are not encouraged to exercise their full potential, abortion may seem like less of an option, particularly if such women rely on being a mother as a sense of personal identity:

...if young women do not have that influence in their lives, then if they become pregnant they’re like, ‘oh, well, you know, this is something I was meant to do, this is something that will love me, this is something that I, I can be in control of...and we’re not encouraged to look into our future and to establish our identity through our dreams and our personal interests or what, what we feel pulled towards and we’re pulled more towards, like, a family or a child or those sorts of things...So that’s why I think a lot of women opt out of, like, having an abortion, cause I feel like it’s just their, their identity, you know, that’s, like, caught up in being a mother.

Though none of the other women I interviewed expressed being quite as close to their family members as Summer, or as open, several others did receive quite a bit of positive support from them.

For example, Shawna had one abortion when she was twenty-two. She was doing a lot of drugs at the time and the father could have been one of two people. One of the men was a cocaine dealer who she believes took advantage of her drug issues at the time and the other was a friend she had sex with after a night of heavy drinking. Because she had done so many illegal drugs, and was also on medication for psychological issues, Shawna was sure the fetus would not develop properly. In addition, at that stage of her life, Shawna says, “I couldn’t take care of myself, how could I take care of a child, ya
know?” The decision to have an abortion was the best thing Shawna said she could do at the time.

Shawna’s older sister had an abortion when Shawna was thirteen so the subject had been discussed prior to Shawna’s experience. Her sister told both Shawna and her mother and nothing negative was ever said about it. Perhaps because of this, when she was faced with an unintended pregnancy Shawna felt safe in talking to both her mother, who ended up driving her to the clinic, and her sister. However, Shawna said she would never think of telling her grandmother about her abortion. In part because it is so personal but also because she thinks her grandmother is a very judgmental woman. Shawna’s sister had a child before she was married and her grandmother did not approve at all. As Shawna says, “If she could be judgmental about that, what would she say about an abortion?”

Shawna also remarked that she does not think she should tell her father; she was “daddy’s little girl” growing up and does not want him to be disappointed in her. She is not sure how her father feels about abortion in general as he never talks about his opinions. Her father might be aware of her abortion now—her mother may have told him, though Shawna is not certain of that—but he has never brought it up and neither will Shawna. Shawna says, “My Dad’s a pretty open guy, he just never really got involved with the girly part of his girls.” Shawna describes her parents as “wonderful” and herself as very lucky to have them.

Emily describes a similar relationship with her family despite the considerable distance separating her from them at the time of her abortion. Emily was twenty-three when she became pregnant and had just moved to Finland. She had been with her partner
for less than a month and did not feel she was able to support a child: “That would have been completely irresponsible of me to have a baby because I don’t have a job; I’m like, floating around the world.” Emily and her partner decided the best thing to do would be for her to have an abortion and for the first week or so after, Emily says she felt “okay”. Shortly thereafter, she relocated to Sweden in pursuit of a job and once she became settled and had more time to think about things, she became quite upset and decided to call her parents in the United States. She describes her relationship with her parents as “close” but says due to lack of money and her busy schedule, she had not spoken to them for quite some time when she told them about the abortion.

Emily’s parents were on separate phone extensions and both listened as she told her story. When she was finished, Emily says her mother said, “Oh no, I’m so sorry,” and offered to fly to Sweden to be with her but Emily declined. Although, her father’s reaction may seem to be rather blunt and perhaps insensitive on the surface, Emily describes it otherwise:

I just remember at one point saying, ‘well, I just, I can’t believe, like, I killed, I killed something.’ And my dad said, ‘well, you did.’ And in a way, like sometimes I think of that I’m like, ‘well, that wasn’t very nice of him to say.’ But then, on the other hand, I think, well, that actually was the total proper response because he just was like, ‘yeah, you did, and you gotta deal with that.

Emily’s perception of her parents’ reaction is that it was very supportive and she describes their conversation as “cathartic” for her and says it helped her to deal with the sense of grief she experienced following her abortion. While her father’s reaction seemed harsh at first, Emily respects his straightforwardness and believes he said what she needed to hear.
In a study examining the reactions of women to the experience of abortion using RU-486 (Mifepristone), Fielding and Schaff (2004) interviewed thirty-five women and found that most women, like Shawna, either never told their fathers about their abortions or told them after telling female friends and family members. Besides Emily, only two other women describe being open with their fathers about their abortions. Both Kate and Jodi received a high level of support from both parents (as well as other family members) throughout their experiences.

Kate was not happy at home or school when she was a teenager and described herself as “kind of naughty”. She was not very high achieving and not interested in school; she had a full-time job and all of her friends were older kids who used drugs and either were not in school or were also uninterested in it. Kate had one abortion when she was seventeen years old. She was on her first date with a boy, got very intoxicated, and ended up having sex for the first time, an encounter she does not remember very well.

Although Kate was not happy at home, she found it very easy to talk to her parents, both of whom she considered feminists. When she found out she was pregnant, she told both her mother and her father saying she decided she would have the baby and finish high school though she ended up dropping out of school and moving out of her house shortly after her abortion. Her parents advised her to think about it a little more; Kate’s grandmother and mother both had their first child when they were only teenagers themselves and her parents expressed not wanting her to follow that tradition. After a couple days passed, Kate realized she did not want to have a child and her father drove her to the medical office where she had the procedure.
When Kate came home after having her abortion, she recalls her father made her milkshakes and her mother painted her toenails. Kate says that despite her strange childhood—her mother and father were heavy drinkers—she had an enormous respect for her parents and said they were quite different from other parents with whom she had come into contact. Kate describes them as being “from the 60s”, and very intellectual. She says they were frighteningly smart, extraordinarily well read, very knowledgeable, and very left politically—"As far left as you can get without being arrested."

Kate was the oldest of four children and two of her siblings, both sisters, were also aware that she had an abortion and accepting of her choice. Her brother, the youngest sibling, was worried she was sick because of the amount of time she spent in bed after her abortion but did not really understand what was happening at the time.

Jodi, who had one abortion when she was twenty-eight years old, describes her experience with both of her parents at the time of her abortion as supportive and helpful as well. She was recently divorced and had stopped using birth control pills because she says she wanted to be off “at least one” of the medications she was taking; Jodi suffers from depression and was taking medication for that condition. When she became pregnant as a result of a condom breaking, she attempted to stop taking her anti-depressants and became suicidal. According to Jodi, if she had kept the baby, she may have killed herself because of the stress and hormonal changes she would have experienced and because of all of her medications, she was worried the baby would not survive the pregnancy either.

The decision she made to have an abortion was not an easy one, Jodi says, but it was the right thing to do. At the time of the abortion, Jodi was living in the northeast but
went down south to be with her parents for the procedure. Both of her parents were supportive of her decision to have an abortion and her mother drove her to Planned Parenthood after making the appointment for her. Her father, whom she described as a quiet man who was not very open emotionally, was sitting in the living room with her as she rested after the procedure. Jodi remembers an advertisement opposing abortion appeared on the television and her father turned to her and told her she was not a bad person for what she did and it was what needed to be done. Because her father did not often express himself in such a way, Jodi said his words meant a great deal to her and she does not think she will ever forget them.

The five women mentioned above all emphasized the importance of the support of their families in getting through their experiences with abortion, whether they were supported all the way through, like Summer, or after the fact, like Emily. For other women, situations were more complicated; some family members supported them while others did not, for example, and for others, family support was nonexistent at best, and qualified as non-support at worst. The following cases illustrate the complexity most women face when it comes to their abortion experiences and the support they receive from their families in regard to them.

Partial Support

Carmen had an abortion when she was twenty years old after she became pregnant while living with her boyfriend. The relationship was “on its way out”, according to Carmen, and although the pregnancy was not what ultimately ended it, she thinks it did cause things to end faster than they may have had it not happened. After finding out she was pregnant and moving out of the apartment she shared with her
boyfriend, Carmen went to live with her grandmother whom she described as “extremely religious”.

Carmen was raised Catholic and though her mother had stopped attending church prior to the abortion, her grandmother had continued to attend and fully embraced the views the Catholic Church holds on abortion. For her grandmother, the idea of Carmen having an abortion would be “very contentious” and was probably “better left unsaid to her”. Carmen’s abortion also took place the day before Thanksgiving and she commented that spending the holiday with her family after was difficult; she was still not feeling well but was unable to explain what was wrong out of fear of their reactions so she was forced to act as though nothing was wrong.

Carmen’s mother, however, was very supportive of her decision and had driven her to the hospital where the abortion was performed. Her parents were divorced and her mother had since remarried. Her mother ended up telling Carmen’s stepfather (who Carmen was not close to) about the abortion and he later used her experience against her in an argument, referring not only to it, specifically, but also to her sexuality and moral values calling her “tainted goods”.

Despite the fact that Carmen was unable to seek support from most of her family and was openly harassed by her stepfather, she did not experience any negative emotional consequences as a result of her abortion; she has no regrets about her decision and has not experienced any negative emotional consequences as a result. Carmen’s mother was able to give her full support which may have made dealing with keeping a secret from the rest of her family and enduring her stepfather’s criticism a little easier than it might have otherwise been.
The women above were able to discuss their experiences with one or more family members in the time immediately surrounding their experiences. Some of the others, like Ruth and Sam discussed next, for example, kept their experiences to themselves until they were in situations that they felt required their disclosure. While neither Sam nor Ruth sought out or felt they received “support” from their families in the sense described above, both women grew somewhat closer to their family members, in particular, their mothers, through sharing their experience.

Telling the Secret

Ruth had one abortion when she was forty-seven years old, just five years after Roe v. Wade. She was married at the time and already a mother to three sons in their late teens. She became pregnant after she stopped taking birth control pills because of problems with her blood pressure. She felt it was irresponsible of her to not be using any form of birth control at the time that she got pregnant but said that irresponsible behavior should not mean she had to have an unwanted child.

When she had her abortion, she talked with some friends about it but she did not talk to her mother until almost ten years later when she became active in reproductive rights issues. Ruth said at the time of the abortion she felt no need to tell her mother and added it “wasn’t that I was ashamed. Maybe I was. We had that culture at the time.” Ruth agreed to be involved in a debate that would air on a relatively popular news show and she told her mother, who at the time she was not that close to, so she would not be surprised if she saw it.

Ruth described her mother as a “little Victorian lady” and said she was more upset that Ruth was being so public about her experience than she was about the abortion. In
general, she did not approve of people being public about anything personal. Her mother probably did not approve of the abortion either, Ruth said, but it did end up bringing them somewhat closer as mother and daughter. When she told her mother about it, her mother shared that she had suffered a miscarriage in the past, something Ruth was unaware of until that point.

Because Ruth had her abortion at such a late age compared to the other women in this study, and was married at the time, support from her mother may not have been as crucial for her as it clearly was for some of the other women, like Summer, who were younger at the time of their experiences. However, sharing her experience with her mother and her mother’s reciprocity in sharing her miscarriage experience brought the two closer than they had been in years. Although in Sam’s case, the change that occurred within her family was not as dramatic as what Ruth described, she had a similar experience after telling her mother of her abortion.

Sam had one abortion when she was twenty-six and married. She and her husband were considering moving across the country when she found out she was pregnant and she states, “If I didn’t have the abortion when I did I would have been eight months pregnant when we moved. We wouldn’t have been able to move and we really wanted to and I’m a little selfish. I didn’t wanna be. I just didn’t want that part of my life to change.” She said there was not much discussion between her husband and herself about having an abortion; she decided and he agreed.

Two weeks after her abortion, her sister had her first child. Sam said it was difficult for her when she went to the hospital to see her sister after and that her reaction to the baby surprised her. As soon as she entered the room she had to turn around and
walk out because she started crying and did not want anyone in her family to see her and ask her what was wrong; her family was not aware she had an abortion and she did not want them to find out. Sam describes her family as very critical all the time and she does not think they would have understood her reasons for having an abortion. Even if they did, she says they would still find something to criticize and they would have asked a lot of questions that she did not want to answer.

Her mother and her sister now know about her abortion. Sam told her sister two years ago but does not remember under what circumstances it came up. Her mother just found out in the past year during a conversation about Sam’s younger cousin who was pregnant and considering an abortion. Sam’s mother made some negative comments about her decision-making and Sam told her mother that sometimes you have no choice but to make certain decisions at certain times. It became clear to her mother that Sam had had an abortion and although she was surprised to learn the information and had “a sadness in her eyes” after finding out, Sam says she did not talk about it much. Both her sister and her mother expressed some disappointment that there could have been someone else in the family and they lost that chance. According to Sam, both her mother and sister believe women should have a right to choose to have an abortion but that they would prefer if people they know did not.

In the years since she had the abortion, Sam and her mother have had several “blowouts” about various topics but her mother does not criticize her as much now because Sam gets too upset. It is not so much that her mother has become more sensitive to her feelings, Sam explains, but rather because she doesn’t want to hear Sam yell anymore. Sam is not certain if the abortion conversation began the change but
nonetheless, a formerly very tense relationship has become more relaxed as the years have passed.

Sam and Ruth both waited to reveal their abortions to their families and may never have done so had their individual circumstances been different. Sam, for example, disclosed her experience in order to defend her cousin’s choices, while Ruth realized that it was in her best interest to tell her mother rather than let her be surprised by it should she watch the news show on which Ruth was appearing. Neither Sam nor Ruth felt compelled to tell their families; both were married at the time of their abortions and although they did not mention support from their husbands explicitly, it likely helped them through their experience in much the same way talking to family members helped others.

At thirty-one, Marie was also a little older than many of the women interviewed for this project and was also married when she became pregnant. Marie and her husband divorced shortly after her abortion, though she said the experience had nothing to do with her marriage ending. Marie was living outside the United States and therefore separated from her family, but she expresses absolutely no conflict or regret about not receiving family support.

The Absence of Family Support

Marie had one abortion in 1972 in London. Though abortion was still illegal in the United States it was not in England. However, English law required that Marie talk to three different doctors all of whom had to agree the abortion was necessary before the procedure could be performed. Marie explained that she did not want to have children
and she did not think she would be a good mother and she was permitted to continue with her plans to obtain an abortion.

She never told her parents about her experience and is not certain whether or not she told her sister. If she did, her sister was the only relative to ever find out. Marie said her mother never would have approved of her having an abortion and that was probably part of the reason she would not have told her but that it just was not that significant an event in her life to warrant talking about it. "It would be like, gee, why didn't I tell my mother that I had a bowel movement today...that kind of thing." Although she thinks her mother would have disapproved, she does not think she would have said Marie was a terrible person for doing it had she known.

Marie was confident in her ability to cope with her experience virtually on her own and the lack of support available to her from her family has never been a concern. Marie never saw a purpose in disclosing her experience to her mother and even though she may have faced disapproval had she done so, that was not ultimately the reason for her to keep her abortion to herself. Marie compared her abortion to an appendectomy in that it was something that had to be done but not a serious enough procedure to require an announcement. For the following women, the abortion experience is guarded from the family more closely and purposefully. Some women I spoke with relied on the support of those outside the family, while others had little to no support, or non-support, around the time of their experiences.

For example, Rachel had two abortions when she was in her early to mid-twenties, both of which were performed in Nicaragua approximately six months apart. She believes her parents are probably pro-choice though they have never really discussed
the subject; Rachel said they most likely assume it is not an issue that would come up for any one in her family so there is no real need to talk about it. If her parents hold any opinion on abortion, Rachel guesses it would be that women should really think about their decision and not take it lightly. Although she believes her parents are fairly liberal people, she has never told them about her abortion and would consider bringing it up only if it was necessary to support someone else's decision, like Sam, or there was some other purpose for sharing that information, as there was with Ruth. Meanwhile, Rachel said if it is not absolutely necessary she has no intention of telling them.

Rachel was also seriously involved with the same partner at the time of her abortions, a man she later married and with whom she has since had a son. In addition to relying on the support of her partner, Rachel also consulted with female friends in Nicaragua but says that her purpose in talking to them was to get information on how to get an abortion rather than to confide in them.

Kelly was also living outside the United States and working in China teaching English at the time of her abortion which took place when she was twenty-two years old. In order to pay for the procedure, Kelly used her father's credit card and later told him the appointment was for an annual checkup. Like Rachel, Kelly did have the support of her partner at the time as well as friends in China that helped her navigate her way through the experience. However, her family will most likely never know.

Her family talked openly about being pro-life when she was growing up. Kelly recalled an incident that occurred concerning the family cat that had been pregnant at the time of her spaying; her father remarked feeling bad for what he had to do to the cat so
Kelly knew how he felt about women having abortions. She says her father does not advertise his position on abortion but one can get the idea if they talk to him long enough.

Kelly’s family is originally from the south and she described them as “rural southern Christian”. Her mother regularly attended a Pentecostal church but she said her father did not go that often. Kelly’s parents have since divorced and her stepmother is just as religious as her mother. Kelly described her parents as “very conservative” and “very anti-choice”; they are “conservative Christian” but not “right wing evangelical”. Because of this, she does not believe she could ever tell them about her experience.

Kelly has also not been able to discuss her abortion with her sister. Her sister suffered two miscarriages which were extremely difficult for her emotionally. Some time later, in fact, Kelly’s sister had a friend who had an abortion and spoke freely about it to her. Kelly said her sister was quite upset and felt it was insensitive for her friend to do so knowing what she had been through. Of her entire family, Kelly said she has told one cousin, after swearing her to secrecy, about her abortion and felt comfortable doing that only because this particular relative had been an abortion practitioner in the past.

In the ten years that Kelly has had her abortion, she has been divorced and has come out as a lesbian. Although her family has been tolerant and supportive of her through these things, she still has not felt like she should go against their core beliefs by making them aware of her abortion. She said that by not telling them she is preserving the family relationship.

Kelly kept her abortion from her family because she knew they would disapprove of her decision. Kristina shared a similar story but her reasons for keeping her secret are slightly more complex; she feels that to disclose her abortion she would also have to
reveal a host of other things about herself that her parents do not know and she does not want them to find out. Kristina was fortunate to have a friend whom she could go to for support but it is clear from the way she speaks that the absence of support from her family made things a little more difficult for her.

Kristina was eighteen and on summer vacation from her first year of college when she had an abortion. She met up with an old boyfriend when she returned home and they began seeing each other again casually and, as Kristina said, they were not always careful about using protection. When Kristina became pregnant and said she never really debated about what to do; it was clear to her right away that neither she nor the father were in any position, financially or otherwise, to raise a child.

Kristina had a friend take her to get her abortion and she spent the night at the friend’s house afterwards. The friend’s mother welcomed Kristina into her home and hugged her. Kristina remarked, “At least somebody’s mom could give me a hug after this experience…even if it couldn’t be my own mom.” When Kristina found out she was pregnant, she did not feel she could talk to her parents about that or the fact that she was going to have an abortion. Her family was Catholic and she had gone to church and Sunday school regularly while she was growing up. Kristina described her parents as “pro-lifers”; personally, she says they are pro-life, but politically, she thinks they are pro-choice.

As she has gotten older and had more “adult” conversations with her parents she has come to understand they though they are sympathetic to women who have been victims of incest or raped, however, they still view abortion as murder. Kristina never told her parents about her experience. In part, she was afraid they would be disappointed.
in her, but she also knew that to tell them of her abortion, she would have to admit to being sexually active and also to telling several lies to cover up her sexual activities as well as the abortion itself. Looking back, Kristina believes that if she had told her parents, they would have been supportive of her decision but it was not something she could do then or she feels the need to do now.

As mentioned above, some research has found that while the absence of support from one's family, friends, or partner can be detrimental to the way in which one copes with their abortion experience, what is worse is “non-support” in the form of criticism, harassment, and even ostracism (Major and Cozzarelli 1992). The following two women, Melissa and Meredith, represent the most extreme cases of both the absence of support and/or non-support.

Non-Support

When Melissa was fifteen, she became pregnant for the first time and was forced into marriage by her parents who did not want her to have an abortion or have a child out of wedlock. Melissa said when she was younger, before she got married, she did not really know much about abortion, or sex for that matter. She remarks, “Where I was raised, we didn’t talk about stuff like that. I had absolutely no sex education. I was really naïve on everything. I didn’t know options, I didn’t know about birth control, what I should, if I should take it, what I should take, and obviously I knew what a condom was but if you were married you didn’t need to use a condom.” She ended up having another child shortly after and was divorced by the time she was eighteen and legally an adult.

Melissa had three abortions when she was approximately eighteen, twenty-one, and twenty-two years old. When Melissa had her first abortion, she had little contact
with her family and therefore did not tell them. Melissa’s husband was abusive to her and she was resentful toward her parents for forcing her “into a situation that was just horrible.” She was still married at the time of her abortion and her husband took her to the clinic and waited outside while she went in for the procedure. When she came out to meet her husband, she recalls that all he said was, “Thanks for killing my kid on my birthday,” a comment Melissa says provoked guilt within her though she knew she had made the right decision.

Shortly after her abortion, Melissa and her husband were divorced. He was sent to jail for sexual assault of two other women and Melissa was left alone with her two children with no financial support. She described the welfare system as “really, really bad’ and said she ended up being homeless for a time. Her mother refused to allow her back into the house so Melissa got herself put on a two-year waiting list for public housing and she “just couldn’t get any help.” Due to the circumstances, her children ended up being placed in a Catholic orphanage for a year and a half during which time Melissa tried to gain custody of the children again. She says the court determined she was unstable financially and without stable housing and therefore she was unable to do so and the children went to live with one of her half-siblings on her father’s side of the family. Melissa said the relative that took her children in was also “really Christian” and did not want Melissa to be around her own children which she recalls was “a little hard psychologically.” Melissa’s ex-husband who had been released from jail ultimately ended up having custody of the children which he was granted right around the time of Melissa’s second abortion.
She talked about being happy when she found out she was pregnant the second time because she thought the new but shaky relationship she was currently involved in would somehow come back together if they had a child, a notion she describes as “cliché”. Because at first she wanted to carry the second pregnancy to term and therefore she had been quite open about it, Melissa said her father did know about her second abortion and by that point, Melissa remarked he had “seen and heard everything” and did not really care. However, Melissa’s mother did not know because she “didn’t really talk to her anyway [anymore] so it didn’t matter.”

Melissa was still somewhat involved with the same man during the time of her third abortion though she is not sure he was the father as she was going through a very bad time:

I had the lowest rock bottom self-esteem that you can imagine and I just didn’t care about myself and why would I if no one else did and, and it was just like I was sleeping around with my guy friends. I kind of didn’t have any respect for myself and I just, I don’t know...I didn’t care...I didn’t want to live. And so, I ended up getting pregnant but I didn’t know whose it was...it was completely irresponsible of me to get pregnant and I hate even saying that because I feel that puts more of the responsibility on me to get pregnant myself than both of us...I was just, it’s hard to explain the kind of mind frame I was in at that time.

She described him as being very supportive on both occasions but felt somewhat coerced into her decision by his parents who did not approve of her or the pregnancies and “basically begged” her to have an abortion.

Melissa’s mother has since passed away but she never found out about any of Melissa’s abortions. Her father was not aware of the first one but Melissa explains that it was due to the fact that they “just don’t really talk about stuff like that” and not because she would have wanted to avoid telling him. Melissa said, “I wouldn’t have a problem
telling him and he, he probably, he wouldn't even have a problem hearing it cause like I said, my Dad isn't necessarily the same mentality as my Mom was, it's just, he kind of went along with whatever my Mom said…”

Melissa was able to talk to her partner through her second and third abortions, though her family was largely absent. However, the negative reaction from his parents to her being pregnant made her feel coerced into having the abortions. Additionally, her husband’s non-support and abusive behavior through her first abortion made her experience quite difficult despite her confidence that she was making the right decision at the time. Clearly, Melissa’s self-esteem suffered as a result of a host of issues in addition to the lack of support she received through her abortions—her rocky relationship with her mother, her years of mistreatment by men, and her separation from her children—but she is clear that all three were necessary and she does not regret any of her choices.

While Melissa experienced some guilt provoked by the reaction of her husband after her first abortion, and endured the negative reaction of her new partner’s parents through her second and third abortions, she was able to reconcile those feelings with time. For Meredith, her experience was made considerably more difficult by the reaction of her family to her abortion and to other aspects of her life. While Melissa spoke strongly and self-assuredly about coming to terms with her abortions throughout our conversation, Meredith’s tone was somber as she recalled the details of her experience. Meredith, like Kate discussed above, got pregnant the first time she had sex. She was approximately twenty at the time of her abortion. Her family knows about her abortion but found out by accident as Meredith says she never would have told them.
Meredith’s mother is a Catholic woman she describes as not very strict or fundamentalist in earlier years. She remembers talking to her mother about abortion when she was growing up and she never got the impression that she was pro-life but she did tell Meredith it would not have been an option she ever considered. When Meredith was younger, she said her mother seemed to have more of a liberal mindset but that for some reason she became more fundamental in her thinking: “My Mom has her own ideas about things.” Meredith said she knows of nothing specific that caused the shift in her thinking, she just changed.

One of Meredith’s two sisters had a second trimester abortion some time after Meredith’s experience which required her to travel to a facility that would perform the procedure. According to Meredith, her mother was not at all supportive of her sister and gave her a very hard time throughout her experience. In an attempt to console her and help her to feel less alone, Meredith revealed to her sister that she too had an abortion. Later, when her mother launched into yet another tirade of criticism, Meredith’s sister blurted out her story and asked why her mother never seemed to object to that. Meredith’s mother is still angry though it has been three years since she found out.

When Meredith was about twenty-three, she had another unintended pregnancy but did not want to have another abortion so she and her partner decided to get married. The two eloped because they were unable to get either family to agree on anything. Her parents were very unhappy about it and accused her of bringing shame to the family by getting pregnant before she was married. Her sister had had a child out-of-wedlock and her parents were still upset about it for the same reason. Her father ended up calling Meredith a “whore” in an argument about it but eventually, about a year later, he calmed
down and expressed being very sorry for how he had acted. However, Meredith’s mother
never changed her view of the situation. Meredith ended up having a miscarriage and
said her mother was more upset that she had not been made aware of it as it was
happening than she was worried about Meredith; she did not seem to remember that days
before she had been screaming at her about her pregnancy and Meredith did not consider
going to her mother for fear of her reaction.

Meredith wrote a letter to her mother explaining her perspective on things and
why she was upset but her mother said she did not want anything further to do with her.
Meredith no longer speaks to her mother and said though there are other reasons—“It’s
complicated”—the abortion was “the nail in the coffin.” Meredith still talks to her father
but only occasionally. Her parents also did not agree with her choice of majors in
college; Meredith began as a business student but later changed to a social science major.
Her parents thought the route she chose was impractical and though she is now successful
in her career as a college professor, they still believe she is being impractical.

It is clear from the above cases that the support women receive while going
through an unwanted pregnancy and an abortion is important to how they come to view
their experiences. While some women, like Marie, for example, never feel the need to
ask for support from their families, others, like Summer, feel incredibly grateful for the
support they received and credit it with helping them through a painful experience. Still
others were able to get necessary support from friends and significant others which
helped them through their experience despite the fact that confiding in their families was
not considered a possibility.
Meredith and Melissa were the only women I spoke with who experienced blatant non-support through their abortions from a significant person in their life and it is quite apparent that it negatively affected their view of themselves and their situations. However, Melissa and Meredith’s cases also illustrate the complexity of women’s experiences and demonstrate many factors in addition to the abortion itself that may come into play in creating negative feelings. For example, Meredith clearly experienced a history of criticism from both of her parents and Melissa suffered through a history of domestic violence and a contentious relationship with her mother. In other words, the lack of self-esteem and feelings of guilt suffered by both women was likely to have been caused by a multitude of issues, one of which was a lack of support, rather than simply the abortions themselves.
CHAPTER VI

THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF ABORTION

The abortion experience is multilayered and complex and although emotions are often downplayed or neglected in the sociological literature on abortion (Avalos 1999), the following examples illustrate that emotions are an important aspect of women’s abortion experiences. Some of the women I interviewed for this project were unwavering in their decision to have an abortion; they experienced little to no emotional conflict at the time or since. Other women, however, found the experience to be challenging for them and one with which they still struggle emotionally though they may still regard their decision as the right choice, and in some cases the only choice, they could have made at the time. Still others felt their experience changed them as individuals for the better and without the option of abortion, they feel their lives would have taken a much different path, sometimes for the worse. What is of particular interest, however, is that for most of the women I spoke with, the abortion experience affected them in a multitude of ways and to varying degrees and has by no means been ‘black and white’.

*Abortion Without Conflict*

Seven of the twenty women I interviewed for this project expressed feeling no conflict regarding their decisions to have abortions. Kate, for example, said that she does not think at all about her abortion if the subject is not brought up some other way—by a friend, for instance, or in the news. After her abortion at seventeen, Kate remembers feeling relieved and thinking “Thank God”. She was not ready for a baby and is sure that
having an abortion was "absolutely" the best decision she could have possibly made and one with which she is completely comfortable. Going through the experience of having an abortion, according to Kate, made her more determined that women should have the right to choose abortion as an option and more determined to fight to keep that right.

Similarly, Marie, who had an abortion in England one year before it was legalized in the United States, said she does not think about her own experience unless she sees news stories regarding the harmful effects of abortion, stories which she believes can be misleading. Russo and Zierk (1992) assert that the negative consequences of having an abortion can not be separated from the effects of having an unwanted pregnancy, a stressful event in and of itself, or the situation of individual women at the time they became pregnant. Marie remarked that facing an unwanted pregnancy was "another thing [she had] to do." For her, the logistics of having an abortion, which involved finding a provider and then convincing three different doctors that an abortion was warranted, were far more stressful than the experience itself. Marie equates her abortion with any minor surgery stating, "If I had had an appendectomy, it would have been as stressful."

Like Marie, Rachel found the experience of dealing with an unwanted pregnancy more stressful than the experience of having an abortion. Rachel said finding out she was pregnant was a "scary" experience and perhaps even "life threatening in the moment." Rachel said she thought, "I can not be pregnant right now. I need to deal with this. This can't happen." There was not much discussion between Rachel and her partner, with whom she became involved in Nicaragua where she was living at the time shortly before becoming pregnant, regarding their options for dealing with her pregnancy. Rachel knew
she wanted to have an abortion and her partner did not challenge her decision though she says he would have been happy to have the child. After the abortion, Rachel said emotionally she felt fine; she does not dwell on her choice to have an abortion and knows she made the right decision.

Having the stability (financially as well as emotionally) and resources to contend with an unwanted pregnancy and obtain an abortion can help reduce the amount of conflict women feel in regard to their experience (Avalos 1999; Mueller and Major 1989). Tara, for example, said she feels as though she had a “very easy” and “privileged” experience with abortion. She had health insurance, so she did not have to worry about being able to afford to have an abortion, and she had the means of transportation to get to her doctor’s office. Tara also had a supportive partner, which Major and Cozzarella (1992) argue can positively affect the way a woman adjusts to the experience of having an abortion. Tara said she has heard about research that emphasizes the possible negative effects of abortion but that a lot of what she reads are “myths” and abortion does not have to be “that big of a deal.”

Tara also knows how lucky she is to have had the level of confidence she did about her decision to have an abortion which she said was the right decision for her to make and like the other women I have mentioned, one that has caused her no regret. When Tara discovered she was pregnant, she was congratulated by her doctor who also later made a comment that insinuated she did not approve of providing patients with information about abortion as an option and offered to let Tara listen to the fetal heartbeat though. Tara declined that offer and also never returned to that particular doctor. Tara
recognized that had she been more unsure or conflicted about her decision to terminate her pregnancy, these “little things” would have been much harder for her to face.

Research also suggests that women who do not struggle with their conscience over the morality of abortion face less conflict than women who do (Avalos 1999). Miller (1992) for example, based on data collected from over nine hundred women who had abortions in the San Francisco area in addition to a review of previous studies, states that Protestant women are less likely to feel guilty or to be conflicted in their decision to have an abortion simply because they are not exposed to strict moral proscriptions about abortion throughout their lives in the same way Catholic women might be due to the Catholic Church’s prominence and vocal nature in the abortion debate. Of the seven women I interviewed that were not conflicted about their decisions to have an abortion, three were raised as Protestants, including Tara who said that she was lucky not to have any “moral baggage” going into her experience with abortion that may have made the decision “much more difficult.” Interestingly, three of the women were raised Christian—two of them Catholic, religions that are well-known for their stance against abortion. Despite the religious background of these three women, they chose to have abortions without conflict. Rachel was the only woman of the seven who was not raised in a specific religion. None of the women I spoke with consider themselves religious now, however, nor did they at the time of their abortions.

Although the women mentioned above did not experience any conflict about their abortions, many women do to some degree, whether such feelings are temporary or not. However, of those women in this study who did report some level of ambivalence, doubt,
or regret, all of them concluded that regardless of their reactions, they are sure the
decision to have an abortion was the right one.

Faces of Conflict: Temporary Doubt

Carmen said that when she had her abortion at twenty, she worried that she would
not be able to live with herself after the abortion, that it would affect her negatively in the
future, and that she would end up regretting her choice. However, none of those things
happened and Carmen has never felt any regret about having an abortion. She feels
having an abortion was the best choice for her and she thinks little about it now if it does
not get brought up. Whereas Carmen’s feelings of doubt were assuaged shortly after her
abortion, five of the women I spoke with experienced conflicted feelings that were more
lingering.

Guilt, Punishment, and Forgiveness

Meredith had an abortion when she was approximately twenty years old. Though
research suggests that brief counseling after an abortion can prevent or reduce any
negative psychological reactions that might occur, Meredith received counseling during
her follow-up appointment, but does not feel it helped her with some of the feelings she
continued to experience after her abortion (Wilmoth, de Alteriis, and Bussell 1992).

Meredith felt “guilty” and “stupid” for getting herself into a situation in which she
had to make that choice and thinks that she should have been more careful. For
Meredith, her abortion was a “horrendous experience” that she does not think she could
ever go through again due to what she described as the “trauma of just kind of dealing
with just feeling like I had the life sucked out of me.” Meredith also explained that she
still feels ashamed that she and her partner, a man she later married, were not using birth control at the time she became pregnant and “left things to chance”. It was the first time the two had been sexually active together and because she was so young, and unmarried, she felt having an abortion was her only option at the time. However, she also feels ashamed for having had an abortion; she is ashamed because of what she grew up learning about abortion in the Catholic Church and she also found it shameful that she and her husband were unable to talk to their families about what they were going through. Joy (1985) and Mueller and Major (1989) argue that social factors, such as the inability to discuss one’s abortion with family and/or friends and thereby receive adequate emotional support can negatively affect how one adjust to having an abortion. Meredith was raised in a Catholic home, as was her husband, and her relationship with her mother was then and still is tumultuous. Because of these things, Meredith did not feel she could have gone to either her husband’s family or her own for support. In addition, at the time, Meredith felt ashamed of herself for confessing her abortion to her college professors in order to explain her absences from class.

A few years after her abortion, Meredith became pregnant again at which point she said, she and her husband decided to “do the right thing” and have this child. Meredith said it was not that they felt what they did was wrong, per se, but they both knew that if they had been in a better position financially as well as in their relationship to have a child during her first pregnancy, they would have made a different decision. Meredith miscarried shortly into her pregnancy and blamed herself, wondering if she was being punished by God. Feeling as though punishment is deserved, Joy (1985) states, is common for some women who have had abortions. Clearly, Meredith has suffered a
great deal of conflict over her choice to have an abortion but said, “I made the best decision that I could. I wouldn’t say it’s the right decision...it wasn’t the decision that I wanted to make...it’s just the best decision that I could make at the time.”

Kristina, like Meredith, also felt disappointed with herself for making bad decisions she thinks led to an unintended pregnancy; she was involved with a former boyfriend at the time of her pregnancy and feels she lowered her standards and allowed herself to be used for sex. Kristina said she felt she was a smart girl who should have known better and “[her] irresponsibility produced a child [she] was willing to kill.” To Kristina, having an abortion felt like taking a life and though she thinks that is “certainly debatable”, Kristina realizes her view is one reason she found her abortion to be so “traumatic” despite the fact that she said if she could go back she still would not have kept the child, though she may have considered adoption.

In the eleven years or so that have passed since Kristina had an abortion, her feelings about it have changed. At first, Kristina said, she did not think much about her experience at all but has since tried to remember and reflect on what happened. She became “consumed with details” when she found out she was pregnant—finding an abortion provider as well as transportation to get to the clinic, etc.—but did not feel any guilt until approximately a year before being interviewed for this project; she became a Christian since having her abortion and in part, Kristina credits her new faith with her reexamination of that experience. She began to devote more time to thinking about her abortion and decided she “[thought] she had some guilt” about her decision. Joy (1985) found that some women feel the need to ask for forgiveness after having an abortion and this is precisely what Kristina did; she said she prayed to God saying, “If this is
something that was wrong and sinful then I ask for grace.” Kristina said that since she asked God to forgive her, she has had peace about the decision she made and has tried to accept it, as “a part of who [she is].”

Denise, who was involved with The Worldwide Church of God and later became Catholic, also asked God to forgive her for having an abortion a few months after the experience. Denise had a very difficult pregnancy that she brought to term which she thinks nearly killed her and when she found she was pregnant again, she felt she needed to terminate her pregnancy to protect her own health, “When I had the abortion I felt like abortion was wrong but it was more important for me to be alive.” Because of her circumstances, she considers her abortion as “therapeutic”. However, Denise said it was not a choice she made lightly and she felt bad about it for quite awhile wondering if she had done something she should not have. When she went in for the procedure, she felt she could not go through with it and asked her provider to stop during the procedure though it was too late. Denise said she felt that she “killed something” and needed to be forgiven for that. “Eventually,” Denise said, “...a few months later, I guess, I made my peace with God. I said, ‘hey, if I did something wrong, forgive me.” Since her conversation with God, Denise has felt better about her decision. She said she has never had any regrets and only had a little guilt before asking God for forgiveness, after which point, she has had none. When thinking about her abortion now, Denise said, “I did what I thought I had to do and I feel that I’m glad I did it.”

While the three women discussed above felt they were indeed doing something wrong in having an abortion, Julie’s experience was quite different.
Ambivalence and Regret

According to Joy (1985) and Miller (1992), the more ambivalence a woman feels when in the process of making the choice to have an abortion, the more likely she is to feel regret about her decision later. Julie had two abortions, one when she was about twenty-two and one at thirty-nine. Julie remembers "drinking a ton" after her first abortion and being a little depressed. She explained her feelings about that abortion this way:

"It's like when you have sex for the first time...it's almost like you just feel like something's changed. And I wasn't sad but it's like, I'll never be the same again...It was just a loss, kind of, and no one's really aware of it cause you're living with it without anyone else knowing or your friends from college or whatever. On the outside you're, you know, having a good time...but inside you're feeling a little sad, so it's isolating in a sense. Or you're feeling it but you're not sharing it with anybody."

Though Julie expressed feeling "a little sad" about her first abortion, it was her second abortion that caused her the most pain though she did not get really "depressed" until after four or five months, at which point Julie said she experienced what she equates with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

"Some people don't even believe in PTSD but what I think is it's almost a self-protective thing, like you're going through so much at that moment you can't deal with anything else so you just kind of keep going and then when you can actually deal with it at least on some level, it hits."

Based on an analysis of available research, Speckhard and Rue (1992) assert that "postabortion syndrome" is a type of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and should be considered an emerging public health concern. Postabortion syndrome, they state, is characterized by "chronic or delayed development of symptoms resulting from impacted emotional reactions to the perceived physical and emotional trauma of abortion" (P.105).

Julie said she felt "all over the place at work" and "just not happy". Incidentally, the man
she was with at the time also worked with her, which exacerbated Julie's feelings because
seeing him everyday reminded her of the experience and she was hurt that he did not feel
he was ready to raise a child.

Julie said the sadness she has experienced about her second abortion was not
because she felt like she "murdered something" but because she wanted to keep the baby
and would have had it not been for the partner she was involved with at the time who
became "terrified" when she told him she was pregnant and Julie said, made it clear that
he did not want to have a child. As Joy (1985) found, women can experience anger
toward their partners if they feel they were pushed or coerced into choosing abortion or
simply for having to deal with having an abortion while their partner does not. Julie
explained that she was angry with her partner at the time and felt that his reaction played
a major part in her decision to have an abortion but she does not blame him now; she said
the final responsibility for her decision was her own and one she regrets most because she
said, it's "too late in the day" for her to have children now. Julie was forty-eight at the
time of the interview and feels she might have missed her only chance to have a child but
said that her own experience has not affected her belief that women need to have the right
to the option of abortion.

While the above cases illustrate both the experience of conflict over the decision
to have an abortion as well as the absence of such conflict, most of the women
interviewed for this research had mixed feelings about various aspects of their abortions,
some of which have changed with time.
Dissonance

As stated previously, all of the women in this study felt that in the end, the choice they made to have an abortion was the right one, though some believe that to be a rationalization designed to deny any negative thoughts or feelings about having an abortion (Speckhard and Rue 1992). However, through the process of both having an abortion and coming to terms with the experience, women expressed various concerns from what constitutes personhood, to the concern, like Julie’s, that they may have missed their opportunity to have children. Additionally, some of the women I interviewed who have faced some of these struggles within themselves have also emerged feeling more in control of their lives and more powerful as women. As will be illustrated later, some women also view their abortions as positive life-changing experiences despite being difficult.

What Constitutes Life?

Fielding and Schaff (2004) note that when examining how women perceive the experience of abortion it is important to consider personal as well as structural circumstances such as the social world individual women live in and how various aspects of abortion are socially-constructed. For example, the term “baby killing”, Fielding and Schaff argue is a social construction that constrains women and report that in their research, those women who viewed their pregnancy as a ‘baby’ from the beginning had a more difficult time dealing with their abortions than those who did not. How an individual defines personhood is far more important, in other words, than what biology illustrates (see Luker 1984, for example).
Meredith, as discussed above, experienced quite a bit of conflict about her abortion. Conflict that was perhaps exacerbated by a subsequent pregnancy which made her look very differently at how we, as a society, construe what is a baby and what is merely a potential baby. Through the process of carrying a pregnancy to term and giving birth, Meredith said she was confronted with doubts about when life actually begins and what that meant her abortion had been. Meredith said when she was pregnant, she thought more about her abortion because she realized that “it wasn’t just a bunch of cells”, which is how she and her husband talked about it at the time in order to make themselves feel better. Her experience with carrying a pregnancy to term also caused her to think that what she did when she had an abortion was interrupt it [the fetus] “before it had a chance to become anything.” Though the experience of childbirth did affect her feelings in regard to her own abortion, she said her opinion that women should have the right to choose did not change.

Rebecca experienced some conflict when she became pregnant because, like some of the other women in this study, she felt “stupid” for having unprotected sex and putting herself in a position where she would need an abortion. Rebecca does not regret her choice at all now and any sense of guilt or loss she experienced in relation to her abortion has dissipated in the years that have passed. Interestingly, it was a relatively negative experience that helped her to feel better about her abortion. After the abortion, Rebecca said, some “tissue matter” was left inside of her, which she later expelled:

That really did a number on me, for sure, for sure. However, it also, once I got past seeing this thing come out of me, it helped me in the sense that it was so clear that it was just like, a mass of, like, what it is as opposed to like, you know, a human being. So it helped, but it was also psychologically pretty screwy.
Shawna's story is interesting because rather than feeling better about her abortion, Shawna felt worse as time went on. Shawna has never questioned herself as to whether or not she made the right decision nor has she changed her view that women need to have the right to choose. However, Shawna is very clear about the fact that she would never have another abortion. Some time after her abortion, Shawna enrolled in nursing school and her change of heart occurred when the class was learning about fetal growth and development.

At the point that I had my abortion [approximately eight weeks into the pregnancy] the baby’s heart was beating and functional. Cause in my mind, back then, I thought, ‘oh, it’s just a little, like a pea, you know, like a little tiny pea, and it doesn’t feel anything and it’s, you know, it’s not real.’ And then I learned that it is real, and its heart is beating and it’s, um, essentially all of its body parts are there, they just need to develop. Had I known that, I don’t know if it would have influenced my decision but I think I may have thought a little longer before I made the decision. Because it’s, it seemed more like a person, cause at the time it was more like a non-person.

Denise, who also had a very conflicted abortion experience, felt unsure about whether or not she had actually “killed something”. However, she felt she made the right decision and said, “Even if that something is a potential somebody as opposed to just a thing, I did what I needed to do.”

Missed Opportunities

In addition to Julie, five women who were interviewed expressed some level of worry or fear that they may have missed their only chance to become a mother by having an abortion. Carmen, who did not experience any conflict about her abortion after it took place, did say that beforehand, in addition to being worried that she would not be able to live with her decision to have an abortion, she also thought she would not be able to have kids in the future. Kelly also said she is not sure she can get pregnant now and wonders
if she missed her chance to have children altogether: “You do kind of wonder in the karmic scheme of things if, uh, you know, you had the chance and didn’t take it.” While Rebecca said she did not feel any regret about her decision to have an abortion, she did say, “If I were not able to get pregnant now, I might.” Even Rachel, who has had children since her abortion, recognized the possibility for such feelings when she said that she knows she made the right decision especially since subsequently she’s been able to have children. Rachel acknowledged that she did not have to concern herself with the possibility that she may have missed her only chance to have a child.

Although the women above share a common concern about what the future might hold for them, their concern has not been turned into a real issue with which they have to contend. For others, like Julie, who was beginning menopause, the concern of not being able to have children of their own is more of a reality. Shawna, for example, has found out since she had an abortion that she may not be able to have children of her own due to uterine and ovarian problems. Shawna is still not certain that she wants to have children of her own yet but she said she definitely wants the option of having them. Shawna said when she received the information about her condition, she felt regret as well as guilt for having an abortion even though the doctor explained that due to her condition, she most likely could not have carried that pregnancy to term. Furthermore, to be able to support a pregnancy for nine months, Shawna will likely have to have surgery. Though there is little reason for her to believe the pregnancy she aborted would have gone to term, Shawna still wonders if she missed her only chance to have a child.
An Opportunity to Grow

According to Burnell and Norfleet (2001), based on a survey of 158 women who had abortions, for some women abortion serves to decrease guilt, confusion, and nervousness and increase one's overall satisfaction with life. Fielding and Schaff (2004), who interviewed thirty-five who had medical abortions using RU-486 (Mifepristone) note that some women felt that by having an abortion they were exercising some control over their own lives and bodies. Similarly, Russo and Zierk (1992), analyzing survey data collected from over five thousand women, found that women who had one abortion had higher self-esteem in general and greater feelings of worth and capableness than women who had not had an abortion. Avalos (1999) found that those women who had abortions but emphasized the advantages of terminating the pregnancy rather than the disadvantages of continuing it were more satisfied with their decisions overall. The experience of having an abortion was never discussed as a pleasant one nor was it discussed as something any of the women I spoke with would wish upon themselves or anyone else. However, some of the women in this study did find themselves changed for the better as a result of their experiences.

An Ounce of Prevention

Only four of the women in this sample mentioned taking more responsibility for themselves when it came to birth control or their sexual behavior more generally, a reaction that Avalos (1999) and Miller (1992) also noted in their research. One of the women in Avalos' sample, for instance, remarked that after her abortion, she began working towards personal growth and a part of that process included circumscribing her
sexual activity to avoid another abortion. Although some of the women I interviewed were on birth control at the time that they got pregnant, others were not.

Ruth, for example, was fitted with an IUD (intrauterine device) immediately after her abortion. She said her abortion was the result of “irresponsible behavior, I admit it.” Tara, Emily, and Carmen all voiced the same sentiment; all became very serious about birth control and/or “hyper-paranoid about getting pregnant again” and became more vigilant in their birth control practices in order to help avoid the possibility of another unplanned pregnancy. Though some women do become pregnant while using various methods of birth control, some not correctly and/or consistently (Alan Guttmacher Institute 2005), the strategy of improving the use of such methods is undoubtedly a way in which women can exercise greater control of their bodies. For several of the other women I interviewed, the change in them went beyond birth control use and into their lives more generally.

A New Lease on Life

For example, both Meredith and Rebecca noted feeling a change in themselves as a result of their experience, though it was not necessarily something specific they could name. Meredith said after her abortion she “felt something lifted” and she began to look at the world a little differently. It was not just the abortion, she said, it was everything that was involved with it, such as the lack of support from her family and the pain she endured, and how it made her have to think about things. Meredith considers her abortion a very symbolic and significant experience in her life and says it “pushed [her] to a new level.” Rebecca said her abortion definitely changed her as well, “...like any significant life event, um, I feel that it really changed who I was...it brings a different
reality into your world." Rebecca and Meredith regarded the change in themselves as quite abstract but some women felt a very concrete change and/or recognized the positive aspects of their own experiences with abortion.

For example, Melissa had three abortions after giving birth to two children as a teenager. She was in an abusive marriage which her parents forced her into when she was fifteen and became pregnant for the first time. Melissa's first abortion was at eighteen and she said, "...if I hadn't gone through the abortion I know I would not be alive right now." At eighteen, she was able to divorce her husband and "flee [her] situation", something she might not have been able to do had she had a third child. As the situation was for Melissa, she barely made it out of her situation with two children and lost custody of them in the process. As for her third abortion, Melissa had this to say:

I guess it was kind of more like the third one was a wake-up call that I need to stop, I need to sort out my problems and start, you know, I don't know, getting out of my situation and changing everything because it wasn't just the fact that my life was messed up, I was starting to ruin, if that's a good word, but affect other people's lives...

Like Melissa, Summer also found her abortion, and a later pregnancy scare, to be wake-up calls of sorts:

...I think it was also a sort of thing cause I was again having unprotected sex. It's like, 'Summer, get it together,' it's like, 'you know, this is something you're gonna have to be actively, you know, protecting yourself if you don't wanna have to go through that again [another abortion].' So it was a combination of, like, looking at my own, and taking responsibility for myself...

Not only did Summer become more responsible when it came to protecting herself against another unplanned pregnancy, but through her abortion she realized what having the right to choose means to her as well as what it might mean if it were taken away. As Summer stated:
It’s like, that I have to think I’m lucky for being able to make a choice about my own body is really sad and I don’t think I let myself go there because it touches a part of me that makes me really, really, really upset to see this happening. Because I went through it and because I would never be living the life I’m living or able to reach for my dreams or able to live the life I’m living right now if I didn’t have that option. Like if I didn’t, if I couldn’t get an abortion, like, my life would be completely different and it makes me really sad to see that other women are gonna have to go to different extents to get abortions or they’re gonna have to think that they don’t have the right to make that choice.

Tanya has also realized what having an abortion meant to her and has only become more sure of her decision as time has passed, and since the birth of her son, who she said might not have been born had she not already experienced an abortion. Tanya stated that had she not faced the dilemma of an unplanned pregnancy at all at seventeen, she would most certainly have had an abortion at twenty when she became pregnant with her son. The decision not to terminate her second pregnancy was directly related to her decision to abort the first. As Tanya said, “I had already done it [had an abortion] and I didn’t think that, I wasn’t seventeen anymore, and uh, you made the mistake, fess up, basically, own up to it.”

In addition to her son, Tanya also gained quite an appreciation for the choice she was able to make and like Summer, she reflects on her own experience when the legality of abortion is threatened:

...when I hear about people trying to take that particular right away...I’ll think about it because I’ll think where I could be and it’s certainly not where I am now and it’s not a place I don’t, it’s not a place I want to be...I would’ve been following in my mother’s footsteps and I didn’t wanna do that. I didn’t wanna be a parent at seventeen....I think I made the right choice and given the opportunity I would probably, I wouldn’t change it. I would, it made me a different person than I was before but I think that it smartened me up quite a bit...it made me grow up a bit and realize, hello close call, you need to stop and think about what you’re doing before you do it because now you know what the consequences are and you don’t wanna do it again...
Tanya clearly does not regret her abortion but she did have some conflict with her unplanned pregnancy at the time. She was disappointed in herself and worried about what her family would think and if they would be ashamed of her for what she did. However, she did not start having such thoughts until the experience was over at which point she thought:

It was obviously too late to, to question and I realized that and then I started to think, okay... I felt better after I realized that I was gonna be able to do all the things that I wanted to do, or I hadn’t, I had the, I had the option of doing a bunch of those things that I wouldn’t have been able to otherwise do. And I was watching a few of the, there was a very high pregnancy rate in school when I was there, that year anyways, and I was watching these poor girls and they were trying to go to school and take care of these babies at the same time and I couldn’t do that. I certainly wouldn’t be where I am now had I tried to do that. And I know that now, and that made me feel a little better because at least I had, I had the opportunity to try and do it better or differently, I guess.

Shawna, unlike some of the other women I spoke with, has experienced more regret surrounding her abortion as time has gone on. As mentioned above, she has a medical condition that may prevent her from being able to have children and therefore, she worries that she missed her chance. Despite the fact that she has to face these uncertain circumstances she concluded our interview with this statement about her abortion:

It was a good experience. It wasn’t a bad experience. And I think it’s important for people to know that it’s not all bad. Because I think abortion has, I mean, people whisper the word. It has such a negative connotation and I think that it’s not negative. It helped me, it helped me figure out where I was going because it made me think more about what I was doing with myself. It made me stop and say, ‘wait a minute, what are you doing? You need to get on track and take...’ It helped me take control of my own life...I think I valued myself more because I was able to make that decision and I was able to get through it and I felt like a strong person.
CHAPTER VII
CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to address the gap in the sociological literature on how women experience abortion. While a considerable amount of research has been conducted using survey methods to examine women’s experiences of abortion, much of this has been psychological in nature rather than sociological. Furthermore, very little research has used qualitative methods in order to probe in depth how women view their experiences and how that relates to their place in the social world. This is a gap because qualitative studies are more likely than survey methods to elicit participants’ views and opinions as well as the meanings they attach to their experiences and therefore we can have a more meaningful sense of the variety of experiences and emotions of women who have abortions. I interviewed twenty women for this project and although each of their stories is unique in some way, it was clear that patterns emerged in how they interpret the abortion experience suggesting that the abortion experience is understood in several similar ways by women.

Feminist Ideology and Activism

Experiencing abortion can either solidify previously held feminist beliefs or motivate women to become active in women’s rights when they were not before, perhaps because aligning oneself with like-minded others or those that share similar life experiences is a way of validating one’s own experience (Ginsburg 1989; Luker 1984). Women who considered themselves feminists prior to their abortions generally found
their beliefs in the rights of women helpful and empowering to them while going through their experiences. Furthermore, having an abortion, for some women, creates a desire to help others navigate through the experience either by volunteering at clinics as escorts, for example, or sharing with others the ways in which they handled their own abortions.

For example, Melissa and Summer were both solid in their choices to have abortions in part because their education and feminist 'awakening', as Summer stated, had prepared them to feel they were exercising rights they believe in and to which they were entitled. Among others, Summer and Melissa appreciate that women before them fought so hard to achieve the right to legal abortion, recognized the importance of having that option, and are committed to protecting that right.

Of the women I interviewed who were not presently active in feminism and had not been prior their abortions, all of them expressed that they would be willing to do more to help if they felt the right to abortion was seriously threatened by legal challenges. However, those who are older, specifically Ruth and Marie who both had abortions in the seventies, and some of the younger women who had previously been active in fighting for women's rights, feel that waiting for 'real' threats to the right to abortion before becoming active is a mistake. Luker (1984) found that once abortion became legal, some of those on the pro-choice side of the debate became complacent feeling the war had been won. Women with strong feminist ideologies in this study echoed that point, commenting that they were concerned with the lack of involvement on the part of younger women who they felt were not concerned about the right to abortion or unwilling to devote time and energy to keeping it secure.
Overall, the abortion experience, at the very least, increased the awareness women had concerning the right to choose. Those who were solid feminists prior to their abortions felt empowered in the decision-making process and more motivated to protect the rights of those who may seek abortions in the future. Those who were not active in women’s rights or had not developed a strong feminist ideology prior to their abortion felt they understood what it meant to have the ‘personal become political’. Their experience, in a sense, helped them “mature” as feminists and in their belief that women need to have the legal option of abortion, and, as Kelly remarked, changed that from “a belief in my head to a belief in my whole being.”

Religion and the Abortion Experience

Although all of the women I spoke with had some background in religion at some point in their lives, for most of them, religion was neither a factor in their decision-making process nor did it create conflict—emotional or otherwise—after their abortions. There were some exceptions however, suggesting that one’s religious beliefs can impact the abortion experience by adding to or being the source of guilt concerning the abortion, for example. Conversely, the abortion experience also appears to impact religious beliefs in some cases. For instance, some women move away from religion if they feel their religion’s position on abortion, or sometimes women’s rights more generally, is in conflict with their personally held belief systems.

Research illustrates that most Catholics believe that women should have the right to choose abortion and women who have abortions can still be considered ‘good’ Catholics (Dillon 1999). Given the fact that the Catholic Church is very publicly pro-life, it is not surprising that, despite vast Catholic acceptance of abortion, the women in this
study who experienced the most conflict through their abortion experiences were Catholic. For these women, their strong Catholic upbringing was cited as the root of feelings of guilt that they experienced after having their abortions. However, while their religious background may have provoked conflict within them, it also was what eventually enabled them to come to terms with their experience and assuage their guilt; they were able to find solace through prayer and by asking God for forgiveness.

Most women did not express a change in their previously held religious beliefs as a result of their abortions but for some, having an abortion was a factor in deciding to detach from religion altogether. Some women so strongly disagreed with the Catholic Church's public position on abortion, for example, that they permanently disengaged from all religious activity regardless of the strength of religion in their lives prior to their abortions. Most of the women in this study, however, did not connect their lack of involvement in any religion to their experience with abortion.

Abortion and Social Support

The vast majority of women in this study had at least some support from significant others in their lives whether from their families, friends, or their partners. Those who had the most support when going through their abortions also had very clear ideas about how their abortions had affected them and what the experience meant to them as individuals. These women felt validated by those close to them and had little conflict about their decisions, a finding that is in line with research that suggests that social support has a positive effect on how women cope with the experience of having an abortion (Major and Cozzarelli 1992).
As previous research suggests, women who experienced non-support in the form of harassment or criticism also had the most difficult time dealing with their abortions (Panuthos and Romeo 1984). However, it is difficult to determine if the difficulty with the experience of abortion was a direct result of non-support in that specific case or the result of a history of lack of support from others in their lives more generally.

The Emotional Experience of Abortion

The women in this study reported a range of emotional experiences from guilt, sadness, and regret to relief and empowerment. What is most interesting to note, however, is that the emotional experience of having an abortion, whether positive or negative, did not have an effect on the cognitive appraisal of the decision to have an abortion. In other words, not one of the women I spoke with, regardless of any trepidation experienced in the decision-making process, felt they had made the wrong decision.

For the majority of these women, the abortion experience was a positive one. This finding directly contradicts research that suggests that abortion is a negative and harmful experience for women that creates psychological difficulty (Speckhard and Rue 1992). This is not to suggest that any found the experience pleasurable; all were regretful about being in a position that they felt required them to make the choice to have an abortion and did not want to repeat the experience. However, many women felt they would not be where they are today had they not been able to choose to have an abortion. Some even felt more confident and self-assured for having the strength to make the choice to have an abortion and carry it through.
Limitations of the Research

As mentioned earlier, the major limitation to this project is that due to the small sample size and the number of women interviewed who are involved in academia, these results can not be generalized. Additionally, the lack of racial and economic diversity in this sample prevents the generalization of the results. Also, as is the case with most research on the experience of abortion, it is difficult to determine what factors most influence how a woman responds to having an abortion. For instance, those who had mainly positive responses may be better equipped, for a multitude of reasons, to cope with stressful experiences in general. On the other hand, those who experienced the most conflict may find other stressful experiences equally as difficult.

Theoretical Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

As I mentioned earlier, most research conducted on women’s experiences with abortion thus far has been psychological in nature while very little has been sociological. This is surprising considering the ways in which the abortion experience could be interpreted using a sociological lens. For example, Smith’s (1987) standpoint theory, which suggests examining the way in which women experience reality from their ‘standpoint’ in social life, has been used as a framework for this project as well as previous sociological research (Avalos 1999). While in some ways, having an abortion is a unique experience for each woman who lives it, it is evident from this research that there are patterns in the ways women from various social contexts experience abortion and these deserve further examination. Smith’s theory can help us understand women’s abortion experiences by allowing those experiences to speak for themselves rather than be subject to others’ interpretations of them. Additionally, standpoint theory provides a
way to examine how the specific social location of women affects both their decision to have an abortion and how they interpret the experience retrospectively.

Additionally, it is interesting to note the absence of sociological research on abortion using Goffman’s (1963) work on stigma, especially considering the multitude of ways women could feel stigmatized by their abortions depending on their place in the social world. As argued by Goffman, stigma is socially defined. Given the political and cultural conflict surrounding abortion and the attendant stigma that the issue still carries in American society, it is surprising that the experience of abortion has not yet been examined from this perspective. Although very few women in this study specifically stated that they were either aware of being stigmatized or afraid they would be stigmatized should others become aware that they had had an abortion, the reluctance on the part of some women to tell significant others in their lives about their experience is perhaps evidence of the avoidance of stigma. Ironically, although abortion is a common experience, with more than 1 million abortions performed in the United States each year (AGI 2005), many still see women who have abortions as different, as not quite like the “normals” among us, in Goffman’s (1963:5) terminology. Furthermore, psychological research illustrates that some women experience shame about their abortions and the rhetoric of pro-life activists is sometimes designed to be discrediting or to elicit a shameful reaction in women seeking abortions (see Cozzarelli, et al. 2000 and Vanderford 1989, for examples). According to Goffman, shame is a result of the awareness of being stigmatized by others. While women who have abortions are not easy to distinguish, it is women’s own knowledge of their experience—and how that experience is sometimes viewed by others—that creates feelings of shame. For example,
Catholic women who have abortions may feel stigmatized and shameful to a greater degree than women who are not religious; they are more likely to be aware of and affected by the Church’s anti-abortion stance than women without as much exposure to it. Future research using Goffman’s stigma theory as a framework could help determine the extent to which women do or do not experience stigma and, consequently, shame as a result of their abortions.

Clearly, sociology has much to offer in the study of women’s abortion experiences. While the abortion debate shows no sign of being resolved any time in the near future, as evidenced by ongoing legal challenges to Roe v. Wade, sociological research on the lived experiences of women who have abortions can expand and possibly change the ways we talk about abortion by broadening our understanding of the reasons women have abortions and how their various social locations affects not only their decision to have an abortion but how they interpret that experience over time.

As argued by Smith (1987), “...the standpoint of women is distinctive and has distinctive implications for the practice of sociology as a systematically developed consciousness of society” (p.107). Studying women’s experiences of abortion from the standpoint of women who have them can help inform public discourse by allowing the real stories of women to speak for themselves rather than be subjected to others’ interpretations. Smith states (1987):

Rather than taking up issues and problems as they have been defined and established in the discipline, the aim [of standpoint theory] is to explicate the actual social practices organizing people’s everyday experience from a standpoint in the everyday world (P. 151).

Only when we examine women’s experiences from their own perspective, as developed in their own social locations, will we truly reach an understanding about them.
REFERENCES


### Table 1: Summary of Key Characteristics of Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Great Lakes region. 34 at interview. One abortion at 23 in Finland. Strong Presbyterian background.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jodi</td>
<td>Northeast. 41 at interview. One abortion at 28. History of depression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>New England. 48 at interview. Two abortions at 22, and approximately 39.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Northeast. Early to mid-thirties at interview. One medical abortion using RU-486 (mifepristone) in late twenties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>Midwest. 42 at interview. One abortion at 17. Strongly feminist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Northeast. Early to mid-thirties at interview. One abortion in China in early to mid-twenties. Presently Episcopalian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristina</td>
<td>Southwest. 30 at interview. One abortion at approximately 18. Catholic background. Presently Christian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Great Lakes region. Early 30s at interview. Two abortions in Nicaragua.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>South. 34 at interview. One abortion at 18. Strong Catholic background. Complex family relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya</td>
<td>New England. 27 years old at interview. One abortion at 17. Baptist religious background.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>Great Lakes region. 25 at interview. One abortion at 24. Protestant background.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
APPENDIX B: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS IN RESEARCH AUTHORIZATION

February 9, 2006

Diana Dumais
Sociology, Horton SSC
32D Grove Street
Dover, NH 03820

IRB #: 3611
Study: Talking About Abortion: How Social Context Affects the Abortion Experience
Approval Date: 02/06/2006

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed protocol for your study as Expedited as described in Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 110.

Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol for one year from the approval date above. At the end of the approval date you will be asked to submit a report with regard to the involvement of human subjects in this study. If your study is still active, you may request an extension of IRB approval.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the attached document, Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects. (This document is also available at http://www.unh.edu/osr/compliance/irb.html.) Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,

[Signature]
Julie F. Simpson
Manager

cc: File
Michele Dillon

Research Conduct and Compliance Services, Office of Sponsored Research, Service Building,
51 College Road, Durham, NH 03824-3585 * Fax: 603-862-3564

141

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.