

ABORTION: THE LEAST OF THREE EVILS

UNDERSTANDING
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL
DYNAMICS
OF HOW WOMEN FEEL
ABOUT ABORTION

A SUMMARY OF FINDINGS OF A STUDY
CONDUCTED FOR THE VITAE SOCIETY
BY KENNY & ASSOCIATES, INC.

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Note: This reprint includes pages 1 -10 of the original summary. Used with permission. While this study is not recent, we at Heartbeat, based on our work with women today, believe the finds are still “current” and vital for us to understand when working with women who are considering abortion or vulnerable to abortion.

The Psychological Kernel

Women perceive the choice of abortion as the least of three evils (abortion, adoption, keeping the child) because it prevents the unwanted pregnancy from leading to the death of the self and delivers the greatest freedom.

Death of the Self

The respondents in this study reveal right brain equations (an automatic association made by the mind that is categorical and absolute – black and white with no gray area) in their minds between perceived solutions to unwanted pregnancies and evil. The respondents tell us that each solution involves some form of threat to a pregnant woman's self-preservation. The threat they feel to the core of who they understand themselves to be is experienced emotionally, in a right brain equation, as the "death of the familiar self." The death of the familiar self is a psychological death which is experienced in the right brain as an evil.

Carrying the child to term and keeping it is a right brain evil because it threatens death of both the woman's present and future selves.

Abortion is regarded as evil by the right brain because it results in the death of a budding life.

Adoption is also perceived by the right brain as evil because it leads to the death of the relationship of the mother and child and the death of the self.

Freedom

Carrying a pregnancy to term is seen as restricting a woman's freedom for the future – her future self. Abortion offers her the most freedom by enabling her to return to the life she knows and wishes to maintain.

Pregnancy and the Perception of Becoming a Mother

Becoming pregnant and having a child is perceived as an experience that changes, forevermore, the woman who becomes the mother – who she is to others, but most importantly, who she is to herself. When a pregnancy is unplanned it threatens her control of her life – who she is and wants to be.

Some women have an overwhelming fear of this change because they perceive it as a repudiation of who they are, an abandonment of themselves, becoming a person they don't know or want to be. They also fear an unplanned pregnancy will cause them to appear to be foolish and irresponsible which lessens self-esteem and risks the loss of approval of their friends and others on whom they depend for self-validation as well as emotional and financial support.

Becoming pregnant and having a child is perceived by these women as a change in themselves so profound and total that it goes to the core of who they understand themselves

to be. Such a radical change in who they believe themselves to be is the emotional equivalent of death. Indeed, to the right brain it is perceived as the death of the familiar self.

So strong is the fear of death of the familiar self that abortion is seen by these women as a means of self-preservation. Even though these women believe abortion is wrong – that it is evil, they recognize it as something that will prevent the death of the self which, to them, is an even greater evil. So, the decision to abort is not a direct decision but rather is arrived at almost by default as an act of self-preservation.

‘Choice’ – The Illusion of Control

An unwanted pregnancy is at first met with disbelief and denial. There is a deep-seated rationalization that the current pregnancy is not real unless it is accepted by the pregnant woman. Respondents tell us a woman who has an unwanted pregnancy feels as though she has lost control of her life.

‘Choice’ is an existing attitude offering a woman the illusion of control by implying a process of evaluation in which several options to an unplanned pregnancy are considered and then accepted or rejected. It offers these women a feeling that they are consciously regaining control by going through a decision-making process – “thinking it through.” In reality, very little thought is given once they determine that there is no other way to “save their lives” than abortion.

A key to understanding the Pro-Choice rhetoric about women’s right to choose lies in understanding the nature of the illusion of control that ‘choice’ offers. “Thinking it through” in order to make an informed choice to regain control often means rationalizing why abortion is their only reasonable alternative. The very process of making a choice helps women with unwanted pregnancies deny and rationalize their dismissal of responsibility for the lives they have created.

The term ‘choice’ is used by these women to claim the deep seated belief that the decision is theirs alone and no one else can or should tell them what to do. “Choice” is a way of reflecting what they believe is the intensely personal nature of the decision that a woman with an unwanted pregnancy must make. The real meaning of the word ‘choice,’ these women tell us, is “no one else can tell me what to do.” The psychological dynamics and beliefs underlying the use of the word ‘choice’ are emotionally intense and consistent among these women. And they tell us that most women in crisis feel that there is really no choice but to abort and “learn to live with it.”

Making the decision to abort is not a battle between good and evil. It is a battle only among evils. These women say that the decision to have an abortion is a very difficult decision to make because they agree it does take a life, which is evil, but it is seen as a necessary evil because it is a means of self-preservation – preventing an unwanted pregnancy from leading to the death of the self. And that carrying an unplanned pregnancy to term and keeping the child threatens both the woman’s present and future selves.

These women say they dismiss adoption as an alternative very early in the process of thinking through their options because it provides no resolution to their dilemma. In fact, they see adoption as an even greater evil than abortion. They contend it is a loathsome act because of their professed assumption that the adopted child would be abused or neglected. And they think any child “given up” for adoption would feel rejected, unloved or abandoned. Abandoning your own child to strangers is tantamount to “throwing the child to the wolves.” It is too painful and reflects negatively upon a woman’s character because it is a renouncement of her responsibilities as a mother.

Adoption creates an unresolvable spiritual conflict for these women because in their minds adoption equals two deaths – the death of the child by abandonment and the death of the self by carrying the child to term – so it is an even greater evil than abortion. To these women, abortion saves the child from the ominous fate of adoption, so abortion creates less guilt than adoption would.

In weighing these options, abortion is seen as the least of three evils. They can see no option where good wins out over evil – a unique dynamic that explains why it is so difficult to deal with an unwanted pregnancy.

There is an incredibly powerful need by these women for resolution of their spiritual conflict – good vs. evil. This need is so strong that left brain reasons are used to override right brain perceptions of evil to rationalize unreal beliefs. Because many women who abort pregnancies wish only to postpone assuming the role of motherhood until they are ready to be the kind of mother they want to be, there is widely held belief among these women that they are resolving their spiritual conflict between ending the life of the fetus and ending their own life because the aborted baby can be brought back later when the time is right.

When a woman chooses to keep her child, her spiritual conflict has ended with her acceptance of an expanded or changed definition of who she is and will be. Because the idea of motherhood already exists in her mind, the physical pregnancy is merely assimilated into this idea.

Fear of remorse is at the heart of the spiritual conflict with which these women struggle in deciding to abort. In the absence of a clear and absolute ‘good,’ the women feel guilt at agonizing over the choice between three evils. They continually tell us how self-tortured the women feel who have had an abortion. It is clear that in many cases they do not resolve the spiritual conflict because most of them think of abortion as a sin for which they must seek God’s forgiveness. To them, abortion equals a ‘trespass’ and those having had an abortion must do penance. Many of these women have felt, or known others who have felt, that they were being punished by God for having had an abortion.

These women tell us that a woman deciding to abort knows that she alone bears the burden of guilt for denying the potential life. Just as the fetus is a part of the woman, the abortion becomes a part of who the woman is. They believe that women who abort must “learn to live with the decision.” And the abortion literally becomes a part of who they are – their self-identity. The guilt and remorse they face are tremendous which means they must expand

their understanding of who they are in positive terms or allow their character to be eroded by guilt.

That an unwanted pregnancy can be rectified by abortion along with doing penance and can then result in a learning experience that makes the woman a better person moving her to a higher moral plane is a very strong motif found in these interviews. It is often used in describing the “courageousness” attributed to women who are seen as making a “responsible” decision to abort. Taking the responsibility for correcting the potential damage incurred is seen as a courageous act. And this rationale helps dispel guilt.

Pro-choice Feminism lends “courage” and a sense that abortion is a “courageous act” in order to overcome the guilt of abortion. With this fortress against guilt, the compulsion to default to self-survival – to abortion – becomes easier.

Abortion is thought by these women to be not only courageous and responsible but also a forgivable act when the women are seen as:

- Recognizing early that they are pregnant – a mistake for which they are responsible
- Thinking through all the ramifications of their decision
- Weighing alternatives
- Feeling remorse

Women who have multiple abortions are not forgivable nor courageous and, in fact, are the object of much derision. And they are not thought to be contrite. Virtually all of these women disapprove of women who have had multiple abortions. They want nothing to do with them – they are contaminating. They are thought to be lacking in character, irresponsible, inconsiderate and selfish. It is thought that there should be some way to stop them – that they should be “punished.”

Rationalizing the Reasons for Abortions

Rationalizations for abortion begin with the conflict that pregnancy creates with the woman’s self-identification. These focus on the concern the woman has for herself rather than for the life she carries. And this concern for herself is also a reason to dismiss adoption. Women who have an unplanned pregnancy only want to become “un-pregnant” – to return to who and what they were before becoming pregnant.

As a solution to the conflict arising from a unwanted pregnancy, abortion offers the greatest freedom for the woman. Keeping the child restricts a woman’s sense of freedom both now and in the future. Giving up the child for adoption makes the future less clear. Her uncertainty and doubt about the child’s well being would deny her her freedom. Also, she would not feel free knowing that her child would be “out there somewhere” and may come looking for her in twenty years or so. The possibility of later confronting the abandoned child is absolutely terrifying to these women.

These women give repeated rationalizations for what they fully recognize abortion as doing – “taking a life.” The rigidity and persistence of these rationalizations reveals the strength of the spiritual conflict underlying them.

They refer to abortion as being wrong, but do not invoke a universal moral principle such as “you cannot take a life.” Instead, they weigh the ‘wrong’ of ending the life of the fetus against the ‘wrong’ of ending their own life as they know it. They rationalize that the “life of the fetus” does not have the same meaning as the “life of a child.”

An unplanned pregnancy is threatening to a woman who has never incorporated the role of a mother into her self-identity. She fears losing control. The perception of regaining control makes the decision to abort compelling to many. Being in control of their “self” and their “life” is a major theme in the perception of ‘choice.’

We see that some women who have aborted a pregnancy idealized what motherhood would have been like. They lament the loss of the aborted child and regret having been “forced” to abort a life. They continue to wonder what a child would have been like. Their fear of the unknown – the changes incumbent in pregnancy and giving birth – contributes to their decision to regain control of the lives through abortion, but their idealization of motherhood threatens their rationalizations – they become more likely reject a second abortion.

By contrast, some respondents describe women who are “all too familiar” with the rigors of pregnancy and child care. These women do not idealize motherhood and more easily rationalize abortion as a means of regaining control. Previous experience with motherhood does not necessarily decrease the chances that a woman will choose abortion.

In their minds, having a abortion – killing an unborn child – is evil but it is perceived to be conquerable with the passage of time. It is an evil that is mitigated by the feeling that they did not intend for the pregnancy or for its resulting termination to happen. They did tell us in many different ways that for many women abortion diminishes guilt by allowing the survival of the self. And they perceive the greatest evil in their predicament to be the violation of the self.

Even so, they believe that deciding to have an abortion reflects negatively on a woman’s character. Most women seem to link the need to have an abortion with irresponsible and “stupid” behavior in that an unplanned pregnancy is a mistake and judged to be the fault of such behavior. But they believe abortion is so wrong that they do not want anyone to know about it.

Yet most of these women say that they, or women they know, when faced with an unplanned pregnancy are compelled to seek out the counsel of a trusted friend or relative as a “confessor.” This use of a “confessor” is really only a means to legitimize their decision to abort. Essentially, the role of “confessor” is to lend moral support for the decision that has already been made. The idea that there is a choice seems to exist more in the mind of the counselor “confessor” than in the mind of the confronting the abortion.

The “confessor” is only expected to offer a non-judgmental validation of their decision. That they view this “confessor” as non-judgmental suggests that they think there is something to judge. To be judgmental in this context seems to mean to disagree.

Rather than giving a “choice” to women facing crisis pregnancies, the rhetoric of pro-choice lends strength to the counselor-friend’s conviction that women should feel no impediment to choosing abortion. In this way, the role of “confessor” can be easily usurped and assumed by abortion providers in ‘counseling’ women with unplanned pregnancies.

Respondents who have been called upon to be the “confessor for a friend who has determined that abortion is her only option, tell her she is doing the “right thing” for herself, but they feel they must do this without imposing on her what they feel would be the “right” decision for themselves.

Ironically, most respondents eschew religious absolutes but proclaim the absoluteness of their positions on abortion. Where there are moral absolutes, moral decisions are more clear cut and spiritual conflict is reduced. The battle for abortion waged among three evils creates the spiritual conflict experienced by these respondents by the lack of a clear and absolute good. Decisions regarding abortion are potentially easier for the pro-life advocates who assert the absolute value of the life of the fetus and its right to be born.

These respondents believe that abortion is wrong, but they appeal to left brain logic to justify what they intuit to be wrong. Many respondents see pro-life people as “playing God” as if “there are no other options except to give birth” – “to have a child whether you can care for it or not.” They say “its closing your mind.” That pro-life people think” its not up to me to decide,” is playing fast and loose with logic.

Rationalizations Supporting Emotional Needs

The rationalizations women adopt to support abortion as the least of three evils evolve from the conflicts arising from the affects the pregnancy has on their self-identities. In this very self-centered conflict, many of these women see the right of the child to be born from the perspective of the effects the child will have on them. In so doing, these self-referencing rationalizations focus on the effects the abortion will have on the woman rather than the unborn child.

In the intense desire to preserve their identities these women believe that the opportunity to abort if they choose to offers them the ability to become the person they want to be – a person they believe they could not become if they had had to deal with an unwanted child. They believe that the present self is the foundation upon which the future self is built. If the nature of the present self is radically altered, as it would be supporting a pregnancy, then the future self is jeopardized. Most of these women justify abortions because they allow women to have hope for a future in which events might unfold in accordance with their plans.

The need to prevent bodily changes is the impetus for the abortion being performed early rather than later. Pregnancies become “real” when bodily changes occur. There is seemingly

no concern for, or attachment to, the fetus. The focus is entirely on “I” and “me.” The specter of the physical changes that occur with advanced pregnancy and the consequent stresses that are imagined in carrying an unwanted pregnancy to term are frightening to these women.

These women want abortion to stay legal so that they and other women, can maintain hope that their future plans will come to fruition. Feelings of despair result from the loss of hope – a debilitating psychological state. Abortion promises the restoration of hope and eradication of despair.