
AAPLOG 2008
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Abortion is inherently relational.
Abortion is Inherently Relational

Resolution of an unplanned pregnancy is based on a couple’s connection to one another, each partner’s relationship to the developing child, and many other personal, relational, and situational factors.

If a pregnancy is terminated, the abortion becomes a part of the couple’s shared history with potential to seriously impact their future.
Abortion is Inherently Relational

Relational aspects of abortion are obvious, yet abortion is typically framed individually in the scientific literature. Moreover, studies on associations between abortion and relationship issues have focused on women’s experiences, largely ignoring men’s.
Distorted understanding

Our contemporary understanding of abortion is therefore largely excised from the social and interpersonal realities of people’s lives.
Abortion and Intimate Relationship Quality

Many couples choose abortion believing the decision will preserve their relationship if they feel unprepared to have a child.

However, available data suggest the opposite, with abortion introducing significant challenges and stress into many intimate relationships.
Sources of Conflict Surrounding Abortion-Decisions

1) Differences in opinion related to the humanity of the fetus and the choice to abort.

2) Perceptions of a partner as insensitive or insufficiently supportive.

3) Addressing relationship issues (e.g. commitment, desire to have children, confidence in a partner’s parenting abilities, life-style factors, and long-term goals) necessary to arrive at a decision.
Sources of Conflict Post-Abortion

1) The abortion could introduce negative emotions in the woman, her partner, or both including the following:
   - anger
   - guilt
   - grief,
   - depression
   - anxiety
   - trauma
thereby increasing the risk for ambivalent, withdrawn, antagonistic, or aggressive partner-directed behavior.
Sources of Conflict
Post-Abortion

2) Altered self-perceptions may result in feelings of estrangement from one’s partner.

3) Post-abortion psychological effects on the part of one or both parties may conceivably add to earlier conflict.

4) History of unresolved grief and trauma in one or both partners.
Presentation Objectives

- Provide an overview of published studies linking abortion to relationship difficulties.

- Describe details of studies I’ve recently published with colleagues.

- Consider why and how abortion adversely impacts partner relationships.
Literature Review

Studies have shown abortion is linked with increased risk for various problems:

- Partner communication difficulties
- Sexual problems
  - loss of sexual desire
  - reduced frequency of intercourse
  - loss of orgasmic ability
  - reduced satisfaction
- Domestic violence
- Separation or divorce
In a study led by Vincent Rue, published in 2004, we found 6.8% of Russian women and 26.7% of American women reported relationship problems caused by an abortion experience.

Relationship benefit was reported by only 2% of Russian women and less than 1% of American women.
In 2000 Lauzon and colleagues reported 12% of women and 18% of men indicated an abortion performed 3 weeks earlier adversely affected their relationship.

In a large, well-controlled, longitudinal study by Barnett and colleagues (1992), 22% of German women’s relationships with their partners had ended by one year post-abortion.
Literature Review: Focus on Sexual Problems

- In the study led by Vincent Rue, 6.2% of Russian women and 24% of American women sampled reported sexual problems directly attributed to a prior abortion.

- In a Swiss longitudinal study of over 100 women, 31% reported a minimum of one sexual problem 6 months post-abortion (Bianchi-Demicelli et al., 2002)
In a study by Mercer et al. (2003), persistent sexual problems lasting at least 6 months were identified in 6% of men and 15% of women.

In a recent review, Bradshaw and Slade concluded that 10-20% of women experience sexual problems in the early months after an abortion and 5-20% of women report sexual difficulties a year later.
Literature Review: Focus on Sexual Problems

- Few studies on abortion-related sexual difficulties have explored why the problems arise. Results of one study revealed decreased sexual desire was associated with not feeling worthy of one’s partner.

- In studies of involuntary perinatal loss reasons for sexual disinterest include depression, fatigue, numbness, preoccupation, and discomfort based on sexual activity serving as a reminder of the previous conception, fear of pregnancy, and viewing pleasure as incompatible with mourning.
Overview of Recent Work on Abortion and Intimate Relationships
Overview of Recent Work

Data Description

National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLS)

- 872 males with 105 (12%) who reported having experienced a partner abortion.
- 1081 females with 214 (19.6%) who reported having had an abortion.
- The majority were White (71.4%), with 16% Black, 9.4% Hispanic, 1.9% Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 1.2% Native Americans.
- Education: 14.5% had not graduated from high school, 63% were high school graduates, 15.5% were college graduates, and 6.9% reported an advanced degree.
Female Results

Compared to women who never aborted, women who aborted reported:

1) More positive attitudes toward sex with strangers and with being forced to have sex.

2) More frequent engagement in impersonal sexual behaviors in the previous 12 months:
   - sex during a casual encounter
   - having forced another to have sex
   - having been forced by another to have sex
Male Results

Men who experienced a partner abortion were more likely than men who had not experienced a partner abortion to report:

1) Positive attitudes endorsing sex with more than one partner and with strangers.

2) A stronger inclination to have sex with a friend.
Male Results

3) More frequent engagement in impersonal sexual behaviors in the previous 12 months:

- group sex
- sex during a casual encounter
- having paid for or having been paid for sex
- having purchased or rented an X-rated video
Forget it, Ted... she's way out of your league!
Results Across Both Genders

Both men and women with an abortion experience reported the following:

1) Higher levels of disagreement with a statement reflecting willingness to have sex only if in love.
2) More sex partners in the last year.
3) More likely to have sex with an acquaintance.
Methodological Strengths of this study

- Controls for family of origin, socio-demographic, reproductive history, and sexual history variables predictive of the choice to abort.
- Inclusion of men
- Large, nationally representative, ethnically diverse sample
- First published study to explore associations between abortion and casual sex
Overview of Recent Work

Data Description

The data were collected between 1995 and 1997.

The 650 male and 900 female respondents were 18 to 61 years old and reported having been sexually active in the past year.

- 100 men reported a past partner who had an abortion and 53 men reported an abortion with their current partner.

- 137 women reported an abortion with a past partner and 77 indicated an abortion with their current partner.

48% were white, 25% were Black, and 20% were Hispanic.
Female Data

- For females who had an abortion within a current partnership, when compared to females who never aborted, there was an:
  - 116% increased risk of arguing about children
  - 75% greater likelihood of fighting about money
  - 80% increased risk of arguing about the partner’s relatives
  - 99% higher risk of fighting about the respondent’s relatives
  - An increased risk for various forms of sexual dysfunction ranging from 122% to 182% (no climax, pain during intercourse, anxiety associated with sex, and difficulty interesting one’s partner).
Female Data

- Women were also more likely to report believing their quality of life and that of their partner would improve if the relationship terminated.

- When compared to women without an abortion history, those who had an abortion with a previous partner were 188% more likely to experience pain during intercourse with a current partner.
Male Data

- Men whose current partners had an abortion when compared to men who never experienced a partner abortion, were 96% more likely to report conflict over jealousy.

- There was also a 385% greater risk for conflict over drugs and a 196% elevated risk for frequent arguments over children.
Results Across Both Genders

- An abortion in a previous relationship was related to higher personal aggressiveness scores for both men and women.

- The measure of aggression included verbalized forms like yelling, insulting, and threatening and physical forms such as hitting and pushing.
Methodological Strengths of this study

- The use of a large, diverse sample
- Professional data collection
- Inclusion of men
- Controls for many variables associated with the choice to abort

Available free online
There are a number of logical, yet to be thoroughly tested reasons for associations between abortion and relationship problems. These include the following:

1) Beliefs in the humanity of the fetus on the part of the woman or the man
2) Guilt
3) Anger
4) Unresolved mourning or grief reactions
5) Mental health effects suffered by one or both individuals
Beliefs in the Humanity of the Fetus

- One’s personal understanding of abortion is likely to impact post-abortion adjustment.

- Conklin and O’Connor (1995) found that women who believed the fetus was human and aborted were at risk for negative emotions, low self-esteem, and low life satisfaction.

- Internally directed negativity may be turned outward and incite negative partner-directed behaviors.
Studies show 29% to 75% of women who abort report guilt feelings.

Many human behaviors that lead to guilt can be compensated for by apologizing to the offended or by engaging in corrective behaviors. The finality of abortion precludes engagement in such restorative behaviors.

A person who is consumed by abortion-related guilt may begin to feel as though he or she does not deserve to be happy or to be the recipient of a partner’s love. As a result, abortion-related guilt can lead to depression and withdrawal or antagonistic behaviors resulting in increased relationship conflict.
Anger

- A small-scale clinical study of 30 women distressed by an abortion showed that 92% experienced intense anger, rage, and/or hostility.

- Anger may be directed inward or outward.

- Externally projected anger could be targeted toward a partner who pushed for or demanded the abortion or one who was emotionally detached.
Unresolved Grief/Bereavement

Abortion is a perinatal loss and associated grief responses can introduce relationship challenges.
Kero et al. (2004) found that 43% of women reported grief right before the abortion and 31% reported feelings of grief one year post-abortion.
In a study focusing on men, Kero and Lalos found that 35% reported feelings of grief and/or emptiness four months post-abortion.

These researchers concluded that abortion was a “sad, ethically painful, and problematic act.”
Unresolved Grief/Bereavement

- As noted by Phillip Ney in 1994, women who experience prolonged perinatal grief have difficulty thinking rationally about other aspects of their lives including relationships.

- Bereavement is a complex process marked by considerable individual variation. However, healthy bereavement is generally accepted as resulting in the ability to resume other relationships and engage in new ones.

- Without sufficient opportunity to grieve a fetus lost through abortion, problems in relationships with partners are inclined to develop.
Unresolved Grief/Bereavement

- No studies to date have examined feelings of post-abortion grief as predictors of relationship problems.

- However, two of the most frequently cited reasons for marital discord after a nonvoluntary pregnancy loss are *incongruent bonding and incongruent grieving*.

- Women bond earlier to an unborn child than men, therefore at the time of the loss (whether nonvoluntary or voluntary), it is possible that the women have a stronger connection to the fetus and may suffer from a more significant grief response.
Unresolved Grief/Bereavement

Women tend to be more expressive in their grief responses.
Unresolved Grief/Bereavement

- If both partners experience grief, the nature and timing of their bereavement may differ based on gender differences related to other forms of loss.

- Men tend to exert greater control over the expression of painful emotions, intellectualize grief, and cope alone.

- Men are also inclined to identify their primary role as supporter for their partners following perinatal loss.
Unresolved Grief/Bereavement

- Puddifoot and Johnson (1999) reported that although men displayed less immediate “active grief” they were more prone to feelings of despair long after a perinatal loss than women.

- Women may read the more stoic male response to indicate their partner was unbothered by the loss and/or did not care about their suffering.

- On the other hand, men may misinterpret the woman’s need to frequently communicate as unnecessarily creating more pain and suffering for both of them.

- When post-abortion responses are dramatically different, the potential for conflict would seem to be quite high.
Mental Health Effects
Mental Health Effects

- Relationship problems can also emerge in response to negative mental health effects on men and women.

- The best evidence indicates that a minimum of 20-30% of women who undergo an abortion experience report pronounced and/or prolonged post-abortion psychological difficulties.

- Common mental health effects in women include anxiety, posttraumatic stress, depression, sleep disturbances, substance use/abuse, and/or increased risk of suicide.
Mental Health Effects

- Less attention has been given to men’s psychological adjustment to a partner’s abortion.

- Available data do indicate that male responses to a partner’s abortion may include:
  - guilt
  - depression
  - anxiety
  - feelings of voicelessness/powerlessness
  - repressed emotions
  - anger

- Feelings of powerlessness, resentment, and depression are common responses to the gender inequity inherent in the decision-making process and these feelings may lead to more relationship withdrawal or increased aggression toward partners.
Mental Health Effects

WHEN I REACH OUT
I DON'T FIND YOUR HAND

I DONT FIND YOUR HAND
Mental Health Effects

There are numerous mechanisms through which post-abortion mental health problems may adversely affect relationships.

Among the logical, yet to be tested possibilities are:

- Reduced emotional energy
- Decreased self-esteem
- Withdrawn behavior
- Communication difficulties
- Feelings of self-doubt or limited personal control
- Blaming one’s partner for suffering incurred

There is also a well-established link between mental health problems and substance use. The development or exacerbation of a substance use problem would could precipitate relationship difficulties.
Conclusions
Conclusions

The cloak of silence surrounding abortion has left couples, many of whom may be at an increased risk for relationship difficulties, struggling alone to understand and respond to challenges surfacing in the aftermath of abortion.

Essential first steps to change are acknowledging the potential of abortion to disrupt and harm many individuals’ lives and committing to systematic exploration of the topic.

Only with the necessary knowledge can practical applications be developed to prevent and curtail suffering.
Conclusions
Conclusions

Ironically, long before there was documented scientific support for the negative effects of abortion, there was a deeper awareness of abortion’s dark potential to destroy relationships. In the early 20th century, abortion was not socially condoned as it is today and the reality of abortion was not obfuscated by the massive deception that characterizes contemporary life.

Take for example, the woman in Hemmingway’s short story “Hills like White Elephants” published in 1927. The story, which is told predominantly through dialogue, is a conversation between a couple awaiting a train in Spain.

As they converse, it becomes clear the topic is abortion. The man wants her to have one, assuring her it is “awfully simple…not really an operation at all…perfectly natural.” The woman is utterly unconvinced.
Conclusions

The following excerpts convey her deep understanding of what the abortion would do to their lives *The girl stood up and walked to the end of the station.....Far away, beyond the river, were mountains. The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees.*

“*And we could have all this,*” she said. “*And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible.*” ....

“*We can have everything*” he insists.

“No we can’t. *It isn’t ours anymore.*” ... “*And once they take it away, you never get it back.*”