

Managing Religion and Morality within the Abortion Decision: Data from Qualitative Interviews with Women Obtaining Abortions in the U.S.

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Study Objectives:

Religion and abortion are highly interconnected in political and social discourse in the United States. It is culturally assumed that women who self-identify as religious disapprove of abortion and do not avail themselves of it, and that women who self-identify as non-religious are more open to the possibility of abortion and do avail themselves of it. This assumption has important implications due to the high levels of religiosity of the U.S. population; as of 2007, 83.1 percent of Americans affiliated themselves with a religion¹ and 83% of women of reproductive age did so.² But what role do religion and morality actually play in the abortion decision-making of individual women? Abortion is a common procedure; nearly one out of every three women will have had an abortion by age 45³ and 73% of women who obtained an abortion in 2008 claimed a religious affiliation.² Research has demonstrated the strong connection between individual religiosity and general abortion attitudes,⁴⁻⁷ finding that people who ranked religious importance and involvement highly were more likely to disapprove of abortion, but has not fully examined the relationship to personal abortion decision-making and behavior. One small study found that single pregnant women who viewed abortion more as a moral issue were more likely to continue with their pregnancies compared to those who viewed abortion as a personal issue, who were more likely to obtain an abortion.⁸ To further expand upon the current research surrounding religious beliefs and abortion decision-making, we analyzed in-depth interviews from the 2008 Abortion Patient Survey to examine how women manage their religiosity and morality when describing their decision to terminate a pregnancy.

Methods:

Forty-nine semi-structured face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with women at three abortion clinics: one clinic in a small city in Connecticut, one clinic in a mid-size city in Texas, one in a large town in a rural area of Washington. The interview was conducted either on the day of their abortion or the day of their follow-up appointment approximately two weeks later, and all interviews lasted approximately one hour. All of the participants were 18 years of age or older, eligible for participation in the study and provided oral consent. Data collection occurred between June and October 2008 and lasted between 2-7 days on-site. All of the interviews were conducted in English, digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim with identifiable information removed during the cleaning phase. A systematic analytical approach was devised and included creating an inductive and deductive coding structure. Key topics that emerged are summarized via a textured description and illustrated using direct quotes from participants,⁹ identifying respondents by their age and stated religious affiliation.

Findings:

We asked women if they had ever considered that abortion would be a personal option for them if they were ever facing an unwanted pregnancy. Our sample divided evenly between those who had and had not thought that they might ever utilize this option, and women who claim a religious affiliation are present in both groups. However, it appears that women in each group manage the potential conflicts with religion's discursive prohibition on abortion in slightly ways between those two groups.

Abortion was never an option

Among those respondents who stated that they had always been opposed to abortion as an option for

themselves in the event of an unplanned pregnancy, 20 out of 24 women claimed a religious affiliation. Three main themes that emerged when they discussed their decision-making: personal exceptionalism, and willingness to face God's judgment for their decision to terminate, and feeling as though they had no other choice. Numerous women gave explanations that fell into more than one category.

Personal exceptionalism

The majority of respondents who never believed abortion was an option explained their decision to terminate as personal exceptionalism. The respondents saw their situation as different from others who obtain abortions; specifically, they felt that their rationale for termination was more justified. The following quote illustrates the sentiment that it is okay to have an abortion just this one time and that their situation is justified to have an abortion.

Respondent (R) : I am like, "I am not ready for another one, I got to go have this abortion done." I never had [an abortion before], I don't believe in it, but I got to have it done, because of the fact that I just, already have too many you know and having kids is a lot of money.

Interviewer (I): How did your partner respond?

R: He wasn't too happy that we have to have an abortion, but he knew that it has to be done [...] because he is a Roman Catholic, but his dad's a Jehovah's Witness and I am a Christian and his family doesn't believe in it, I don't believe and my family don't believe in it. But when I went and told them that I had to have it done, they kind of like went off on me, but then after I sat down and explained to them why I had to have it done, then they kind of realized, you know, okay it's just this one time, right. Yeah, it's just one time, get it done, get it over with, so I don't have to worry about it. -24 years old, Christian

Willingness to face God's Judgment

Respondents whose abortion beliefs were built on religious teachings and upbringings said that they were against abortion because of their religious beliefs. They explained that they knew their religion condemned, it but cited a willingness to face any religious consequences of their decision to terminate their pregnancy.

... God's the only one that could judge me. [...] To me, I have always said nobody can judge you, nobody is in your footsteps, nobody is there, nobody can judge you....Yeah. So to me, it doesn't matter. I mean anybody can judge me, my parents, it doesn't matter to me; the only person who can judge me is God. Of course I feel that I am doing a bad thing, it's a life that I am terminating, but I do feel guilty, but it's the right thing to do right now in this moment in time. -33 years old, Catholic

Saw no other choice

The other most commonly cited reason to choose an abortion for women in this group was a feeling that there was no other option for them besides abortion at the time of their unintended pregnancy. The respondents reported seeing this as the only way out of the situation. These descriptions often cited reasons why they could not have a child right now, such as financial concerns or educational aspirations.

Well, like I said, originally I didn't want to [have this abortion], this is not honestly something I really feel is right. Like, for other people, I don't care, but for myself, I never pictured myself doing it. So, for a while I really considered keeping it and continuing on,

and then it just kind of hit me out of nowhere that this wasn't the right thing for me or the baby or anybody else involved. –21 years old, Catholic

Abortion was an option

Among women who stated that they previously felt that they would consider having an abortion if faced with an unwanted pregnancy, 16 out of 25 women claimed a religious affiliation. There were three main themes that emerged as reasons why the woman chose to have an abortion despite possible religious or moralistic concerns. These are that she does not agree with her religion's stance on abortion, that she sees her religion as actually accepting abortion, and that she is committed to the belief that women should have the choice to end a pregnancy .

Does not agree with religion's stance on abortion

A large proportion of respondents reported disagreeing with their religion's stance on abortion. They recognized that terminating a pregnancy was against their religious teachings, but said that they believed their God would not punish for this behavior, or that the church had the wrong stance on the issue as a whole.

... I mean, I am a Catholic. Catholic people don't believe, supposedly, they don't believe in abortions. [...] And, you know, they believe that if you have an abortion, you are going to hell. I don't believe it. I mean, women way before my grandma's been having abortions, you know. See, I kind of see it as, if God was to punish us, like, if you rob a bank, God is going to punish you by going to jail because you robbed a bank. So, I mean I have had an abortion [previous to this one], but God didn't punish me. Actually, he kind of blessed me, you know, because I ended up you know going to school. –21 years old, Catholic

I don't think [abortion is] wrong. I know the Church recognizes a fetus, like, as soon as it's [conceived], and I understand that, but I don't think that every woman, I mean it's a mistake, every woman goes through it... it shouldn't be wrong like that, it's not, I don't think it is at all. I mean besides my Catholic background, I don't agree with the church on that one, I really don't. –21 years old, Catholic

Sees religion accepting abortion

Some respondents felt that their religion was beginning to open up and accept abortion, or that God already accepts it.

I: Are you Catholic?

R: Yeah. They probably think it's horrible and that I should have had the kid and gotten married, but the world has changed a little bit, and I think Catholics have changed a little bit too. It's different.

I: So do you perceive there to be more openness within the Catholic Church?

R: Within the people maybe, because not everyone follows the rules exactly, but the church, probably not. – 19 years old, Catholic

Believes in having the choice to abort

Finally, respondents in this category often said that having the option to choose an abortion was important to them. They explained that no matter what religious belief someone has, they should also have the choice to terminate their pregnancy.

I am just little more open to things, like how people should feel, and not being like forced to do things you don't want to do, like that. I don't like really being governed. So I am pretty, like pro-choice and everything about things like that. – 19 years old, Catholic

Conclusions:

Approximately half the sample of women interviewed had previously been opposed to abortion as an option for themselves in the event of an unplanned pregnancy, and all women in the sample spoke about strategies for managing their religious and moral concerns about their abortion. Others have studied the spiritual and religious dimensions of the abortion decision; Greene Foster surveyed 5,387 abortion patients at one U.S. clinic in 2008 about their decision to terminate. Thirty-six percent of these women reported having spiritual concerns about abortion and 28 percent were not at peace spiritually with their decision.¹⁰ By examining how women who opt to terminate their pregnancies deal with their religious and moral conflicts during the abortion decision-making process, this data provides further commentary on the role individual religiosity and morality have on abortion attitudes and more importantly, abortion behavior. Our findings indicate that women who state that they previously did not consider abortion an option for themselves may manage their discomfort by making exceptions for themselves, by resigning themselves to God's judgment, and by construction a narrative in which abortion was their only option in this case. In contrast, women who previously considered themselves open to the possibility of abortion explain that either their religion is wrong to condemn abortion or does not in fact actually condemn it, and by privileging other concepts such as personal autonomy over that condemnation. A woman's baseline feeling openness of the option of abortion in the face of an unplanned pregnancy appears to have some implications for the way she will manage these conflicts when she is actually in that situation. This finding may help explain why previous research has shown that religiosity determines their abortion attitudes, but the same effect has not been found on actual abortion behavior.

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