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Male involvement in the abortion decision and college students' attitudes on the subject

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Abstract

College students' attitudes concerning male involvement in the abortion decision-making process were investigated with the aid of 94 participants. A *t* test supported the first hypothesis that no significant difference exists between males and females regarding levels of male involvement. A *t* test also supported the second hypothesis that pro-life participants will endorse higher levels of male involvement. A Pearson correlation revealing no significant relationship between level of male involvement and number of religious worship services attended during the last month did not support the third hypothesis that more religious participants would endorse higher levels of male involvement. A multiple linear regression was used to investigate the research question, "Do gender, race, and religiosity significantly predict levels of male involvement in abortion decisions?" Regression results indicate that the linear combination of these variables significantly predicted level of male involvement.

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1. Introduction

The status of unborn human life is controversial (Cahill, 1993). The physical and psychological effects of abortion on women and their male partners are controversial as well. More than 250 published reports discuss the emotional effects of abortion in women, and the majority of scholars contend that at least a minority of women experience adverse psychological effects such as anxiety and depression (Coleman & Nelson, 1999). Nevertheless, up to 1.5 million abortions occur each year (Nelson & Coleman, 1997). Women having abortions offer various reasons (Bullock, 1994), and many of these reasons suggest a primary concern for the woman's personal interest. The pro-choice movement has consistently framed their arguments for abortion rights in terms of the woman's right to do as she pleases with her body (Ruhl, 2002).

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Discussions over male involvement, including rights and responsibilities, have not been as prevalent. Bullock (1994) observed that while men reveled in the sexual freedom resulting from the sexual revolution of the 1960s, a new underclass of poverty, consisting of women and children, has arisen. There seems to have been a shifting of the burden for responsibility for actions from men to women. Exacerbating this is the fact that many who favor abortion rights argue that abortion is singularly a woman's issue (Bullock, 1994). "Little attention has been focused on men's rights and responsibilities in an abortion situation," according to Rosenwasser, Wright, and Barber (1987, p. 97).

2. Literature review

Notwithstanding the relative paucity of literature on male involvement in the abortion decision and the effects of abortion on males, there has been some research, both qualitative and quantitative, in these areas. Scholars have considered both the rights and responsibilities of males as well as the results of abortion in the lives of men.

2.1. *The rights and responsibilities of males*

Historically, according to Bem (1993), in the United States, women were denied the right to legal guardianship over their children. Today the situation is much different. "It is true that the law historically has been and is sex-biased toward men and discriminates against females, but also the law is obligatory toward males and therefore is equally discriminatory toward males," wrote (Aberg, Small, & Watson, 1977, p. 327). Today, men are mostly excluded from the decision-making process (Coleman & Nelson, 1999; Holmes, 2004; Sheldon, 2003). This means that men are unable to prevent abortions regardless of their level of commitment to the relationship. The irony here, as Coleman and Nelson (1999) pointed out, is that these same men who cannot prevent the abortions are bound by law to provide financially for their biological children if the pregnancies are carried to term even when they did not support the pregnancy and were not committed to the relationship.

2.2. *The results of abortion on males*

While some scholars have considered the rights and responsibilities of males in the abortion decision-making process, others have investigated the results of female partners' abortions on their male partners. Coleman and Nelson (1999) noted that only a handful of studies have considered male responses to abortion, and that research suggests that adult men whose partners had abortions during their teen years experienced more distress in early adulthood than their peers who had not experienced a partner's abortion. The results of abortion on male partners vary from case to case. Some men experience rage (Stotland, 1991), while others may respond with grief, guilt, and emotional pain.

Toedter, Lasker, and Janssen (2000) conducted an international comparison of 22 studies in three languages on pregnancy loss, including abortion, using the perinatal grief scale (PGS). Among the studies analyzed, there were nine that included mental health as a variable, and all

nine found that poorer mental health was related to higher PGS scores. The study revealed that intervention can help men whose partners had abortions to experience a reduction in grief. This study underscores the reality of grief experienced by male partners of women who aborted.

Furthermore, there is evidence that males and females experience and express grief differently (Stinson, Lasker, Lohmann, & Toedter, 1992). Such gender differences could mean that measurement of grief, such as the PGS, may be biased because of gender stereotypes, and gender differences could have weighty implications for the well being of people's health when it comes to dealing with grief. These gender specific norms are reflected in how men and women react to pregnancy loss.

The emotions experienced by male partners of females who have chosen abortion extend beyond grief. Poggenpoel and Myburgh (2002) defined pain as a holistic construct in their research, and considered the physical, mental, spiritual, and social discomfort effects of abortion. As Stotland (1991) noted, the aborted pregnancy may have represented the male partner's long-awaited opportunity or only opportunity to become a father, and that feelings of helplessness and loss may follow. Holmes (2004) discussed the feelings of voicelessness and worthlessness experienced by one male partner following his partner's abortion.

In consideration of the rights and responsibilities of males in the abortion decision-making process and in view of the results of abortion on male partners, researchers have investigated attitudes regarding levels of male involvement. Nelson and Coleman (1997) indicate that women endorse lower levels of male involvement in abortion decisions than men, but that men think they have a right to share in the decision. Overall, the participating students did not see abortion purely as a gender specific issue. In another study, Coleman and Nelson (1999) noted that, as a whole, the sample being studied endorsed higher than moderate levels of male involvement in abortion decisions. Pro-life participants endorsed higher levels of male involvement and pro-choice participants endorsed lower levels. Nevertheless, even pro-choice participants felt that men should have a fairly strong voice in abortion decisions.

While much research has focused on gender (Coleman & Nelson, 1999; Nelson & Coleman, 1997), some research has revealed religiosity as another variable that can explain differences in attitudes regarding male involvement. Religious people tend to endorse higher levels of male involvement than those who do not consider themselves very religious (Coleman & Nelson, 1999). Misra and Hohman (2000) reported that frequency of attending religious services is a stronger predictor of attitudes regarding abortion than the religion in which one was raised. Religiosity has been associated with more restrictive attitudes toward abortion (Fawcett, Andrews, & Lester, 2000). Race is another variable that has been investigated as a predictor of abortion attitudes. Hall and Ferree (1986) considered racial differences in abortion attitudes from 1972 to 1984, and they found a substantial and statistically significant difference in pro-choice attitudes between Blacks and Whites each year. The Whites were consistently more pro-choice than Blacks.

While gender and religiosity have been considered as predictors of perceptions of appropriate levels of male involvement, and gender, religiosity, and race have been considered as predictors of attitudes toward abortion in general, race has not been considered as a predictor of perceptions of appropriate levels of male involvement. Moreover, little or no research has considered gender, religiosity, and race together as predictors of perceptions of appropriate levels of male involvement.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the attitudes of college students regarding levels of male involvement in the abortion decision-making process. In view of the extant research regarding attitudes toward male involvement in the abortion decision, several hypotheses and one research question were explored. The first hypothesis was that males and females will report similar attitudes regarding levels of male involvement. The second hypothesis was that pro-life participants (those with high scores on the abortion attitude scale) will report attitudes endorsing higher levels of male involvement. The third hypothesis was that students attending church more frequently (greater religiosity) will report attitudes endorsing higher levels of male involvement. The research question was, “Do gender, race, and religion significantly predict perceptions of appropriate levels of male involvement in abortion decisions?”

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Volunteers were recruited from among undergraduate students at a public university in the South. There were 94 participants of whom 35.1% ($n=33$) were male and 64.9% ($n=61$) were female. The mean age was 20.07 and the mode was 19. The youngest was 18 and the oldest was 38. The sample contained several racial groups including: 2.1% ($n=1$) Asian/Pacific Islanders, 37.2% ($n=35$) Blacks not of Hispanic origin, 57.4% ($n=54$) Whites not of Hispanic origin, and 3.2% ($n=3$) biracial/mixed identity individuals. The majority of the participants, 95.7% ($n=90$), reported that they were single having never married. Three participants (3.2%) indicated that they or their partners (wife, girlfriend, etc.) had an abortion.

3.2. Materials

A previously designed survey containing 50 questions was obtained directly from a researcher who had used it earlier (Carlton, Nelson, & Coleman, 2000) and was amended to gather demographic data. Questions measured attitudes toward abortion, the level of male involvement in the decision regarding abortion, commitment to the issue, and obtained demographic data. Twenty questions were used to measure attitudes regarding abortion. Reliability analysis revealed high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.86$). Twelve were used to measure levels of male involvement. Reliability analysis of these questions revealed a relatively low internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.45$).

4. Results

The first hypothesis was that males and females will report similar levels of attitudes toward male involvement. A *t* test revealed no significant difference between the levels of male involvement attitudes reported by males and females, and therefore the hypothesis was supported. The mean levels reported by males and females, respectively were 43.48 and 43.19. Overall, the

level of male involvement measurement scores ranged from 32 to 56. The mean score was 43.30 (S.D. = 5.49). The median was 43.50 and the mode was 46.

The second hypothesis was that pro-life participants will support higher levels of male involvement than the pro-choice participants. A new variable was calculated to evaluate this hypothesis. If the attitude toward abortion measure was between 20 and 60 inclusive, the label of pro-choice was assigned, but if the attitude toward measure was between 61 and 100 inclusive, the label of pro-life was assigned. Overall, there were 74 pro-life participants and 20 pro-choice participants. This means that the ration of pro-life to pro-choice participants was almost 4:1. A *t* test was conducted to test this second hypothesis. The test was significant, $t(92) = -3.67$, $p < .01$. For pro-choice participants, the mean level of support for male involvement was 39.55 (S.D. = 4.31). For pro-life participants, the mean level was 44.31 (S.D. = 5.35). The hypothesis was supported.

The third hypothesis was that students attending worship services more frequently will support higher levels of male involvement. Responses indicating the number of worship services attended in the past month ranged from 0 to 15, and the mean was 3.33. A Pearson correlation revealed no significant relationship between level of support for male involvement and number of religious worship services attended during the last month. So the third hypothesis was not supported.

The following research question was addressed: “Do gender, race, and religiosity significantly predict levels of support for male involvement in abortion decisions?” A multiple linear regression was used to predict the level of male involvement based on gender, race, and religiosity. Although there were 94 participants, regression analysis eliminated three because participants did not supply the number of worship services attended. Evaluations of linearity, normality, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity showed that the assumptions were met within acceptable limits. Regression results showed that the linear combination of gender, race, and religiosity in the overall model significantly predicted level of male involvement support score, $R^2 = .09$, $R^2_{\text{adj}} = .06$, $F(3, 87) = 2.97$, $p < .05$. This model therefore accounted for 9% of the variance in the male involvement support score.

5. Discussion

The results of this study are similar to those found by Coleman and Nelson (1999). The majority of participants were pro-life. The ratio of pro-life to pro-choice was almost 4:1. The sample endorsed higher than moderate levels of support for male involvement in abortion decisions. With possible male involvement scores ranging from 12 to 60, the mean was 43.30, and this is well above 36.0, the midpoint of possible scores. This finding is not surprising either given that pro-life people generally endorse higher levels of male involvement in abortion decisions than their pro-choice counterparts.

The failure of the survey results to support the third hypothesis is surprising however. The third hypothesis was that participants attending worship services more frequently would report higher levels of support for male involvement. One possible explanation for this is that since higher than moderate levels of male involvement were found in the sample, the difference between those attending worship services and those not attending was not significant.

The results indicating that gender, race, and religiosity, when taken together, significantly predict levels of male involvement was expected based on research indicating that African Americans are more pro-life than their Anglo Americans counterparts (Fawcett et al., 2000), and that higher levels of religiosity are associated with higher levels of male involvement (Coleman & Nelson, 1999). However, further analysis of the data revealed an interesting caveat. African Americans in this study endorsed lower levels of male involvement than any other ethnic group. Contrary to past research, Whites reported greater pro-life attitudes and they endorsed higher levels of male involvement. The generalizability of this study is limited by the convenience sampling technique used. Nevertheless, the sample represented a broad array of various college majors.

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