

Interconnected

How abortion impacts mothers, families and our society

BY ANDREA MROZEK • MAY 2014

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper examines research that is typically ignored about abortion's effect on the family. The impact of abortion on marriage, sexuality, mental health and finally, family life in greater society are all considered. The paper reflects on the research through the story of Lee, one pro-choice woman for whom abortion had an unexpected effect as told in the book *Giving Sorrow Words*.

The effects of abortion on the family and society are secondary effects. Yet there are indeed consequences that remain substantially underpublicized—to our great detriment. These include an increased likelihood of divorce or separation, marrying late or not at all, increased acceptance of rape and increased risks of poor mental health, among others. A meta-analysis published in the prestigious *British Journal of Psychiatry* showed an overall 81% greater risk of mental health problems for women who had an abortion compared with those who did not.

It is not helpful to overstate negative ramifications of abortion. However, by far the bigger concern Canadians face today is the problem of pretending there are none.

This paper aims to challenge the notion that abortion is an individual event, as presented in political mantras like “my body, my choice.” Abortion is hard on the woman, yes. However, an abortion is the result of relationship, regardless of how poor or short-lived. Therefore, examining the effects of abortion on family, relationships and our communities is important.

INSTITUTE OF MARRIAGE AND
FAMILY CANADA

1912 - 130 ALBERT ST.
OTTAWA ON, K1P 5G4

TEL: 613-565-3832
FAX: 613-565-3803
TOLL-FREE: 1-866-373-IMFC

WWW.IMFCANADA.ORG
INFO@IMFCANADA.ORG



LEE'S STORY

Lee was 37 when she discovered she was pregnant.¹

She was in a long term, stable relationship and had two girls already, ages 15 and 10. She put herself in the pro-abortion camp (her term). She believed—and still does—that abortion is a fundamental right, critical to women's autonomy, power, control and independence. She had an abortion at seven weeks—an early stage with which she felt comfortable.

She describes what followed as the worst experience of her life.

“I cried for six weeks. I only got out of bed to go to work (at night). I had no strength. I had no life. My legs constantly gave way with the depth of my grief. ... I saw, or spoke to, ten counsellors and spent \$700. ... Nearly seven months later, my heart was still broken. I never felt relief, only the deepest regret and remorse. What made it worse was that I had trouble finding anything to read that described what I was going through.”²

1. She tells her story alongside 17 other women in the Australian book *Giving Sorrow Words*. Tankard Reist, M. (2005). *Giving Sorrow Words*. Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove.

2. *Giving Sorrow Words*, p. 198.

3. Physical effects, the effect of abortion on attachment to parents or other children, the effect on a mother's treatment of born children, the effect on fathers and extended family and the ramifications of sex selection abortion, which targets girls almost exclusively, would be additional areas to examine but were not considered here for purposes of length. For more information on these phenomena consult the recent book *Complications*. Lanfranchi, A., Gentles, I., Ring-Cassidy, E. (2013). *Complications*. Toronto: deVeber Institute for Bioethics and Social Research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It would defy common sense to think Lee's experience had no effect on her family.

Negative effects come up in expected and unexpected ways. They are complex, involve many different factors and are often difficult to quantify.

In examining abortion's effect on the family, there are a number of different areas of inquiry to examine. Under examination today are:

- Relationships
- Sexuality
- Mental health
- The bigger picture: Abortion's social impact³

RELATIONSHIPS

Abortion is *fundamentally an issue of relationship*, in spite of political slogans to the contrary. There would be no pregnancy to discuss terminating were it not for a relationship.⁴ Teri Reisser, a marriage and family therapist puts it this way:

A woman is instinctively geared to make decisions based upon the anticipated effect upon those with whom she is in relationship (especially her immediate family). But she is also relentlessly tutored by advocates of women's rights to make the penultimate relationship decision—the life or death of her child—in the barren vacuum of individual expediency.⁵

Even as research often contemplates abortion's effect only on the individual woman, some studies do point to relationship quality post-abortion.

Lee testifies to the possibility of relationship demise after

abortion. She decides after her abortion that her way of healing will be through having another baby. If she is unable to, however, she says her relationship with her partner will cease to exist. She writes, "If I don't have a baby, my life will change. There will be no more us. He, too, will become a casualty."⁶

Divorce is a more likely outcome for post-abortive women. "A quarter (25.1%) of aborters over age 35 are currently divorced or separated, compared to only 19% of non-aborters. ...The cumulative effect of these marriage failures is that, by their late thirties, only a minority (37%) of aborters remain in their first marriage, compared to over 56% of non-aborters."⁷

The same study found that "women having abortions are twice as likely never to marry, 37 per cent more likely to divorce, have (on average) twice as many lifetime sexual partners and three times as many partners before marriage, have fewer children, and experience both earlier sexual onset and later marriage."⁸

The authors of *Complications*, a book about the effects of abortion, comment on the irony that "while women may consider abortion because they plan in the future to marry and have a family, having an abortion increases the likelihood that they will never marry, or that the marriage they had planned for will fail."⁹

Even more research shows that "remaining the same" in relationship after abortion is unlikely.

Dr. Priscilla Coleman, psychologist and author of a number of important studies about the effects of abortion, writes this:

"If abortion is perceived by one or both partners as a traumatic event, it is likely to become a defining crisis in the relationship's history, creating the possibility for increased intimacy and

4. Sullins, P. (2003). Abortion and family formation: circumstance or culture? *Life and Learning* XIII: 31-64, p. 33. As found in *Complications*, p. 263.
 5. Reisser, T. (1994). The effects of abortion on marriage and other committed relationships. *Association for Interdisciplinary Research in Values and Social Change*, Vol. 6, No. 4. Retrieved from http://www.lifeissues.net/writers/air/air_vol6no4_1994.html
 6. *Giving Sorrow Words*, p. 229.
 7. Sullins, P. (2003). Abortion and family formation: circumstance or culture? *Life and Learning* XIII: 31-64, p. 34. As cited in *Complications*, p. 263.
 8. *Ibid*, as cited in *Complications*, p. 264.
 9. *Complications*, p. 263.

mutuality or relational decline resulting from attachment injury. Homeostatic maintenance of the relationship is unlikely.”¹⁰

SEXUALITY

Sexual intimacy is unlikely to return to being the same, as per testimonies and research. Lee from *Giving Sorrow Words* spoke about it this way in her diary entry, six weeks after the abortion:

“We have sex for the first time since the abortion. It feels very weird and I am not in it. This is what caused all this....I don’t want this. Too bad. Too sad.”¹¹

The research shows that considerable percentages of women experience sexual problems inside their own committed relationship post-abortion.

More than 30% of women in a Swiss longitudinal study reported a minimum of one sexual problem six months after an abortion.¹²

Another study showed that 24% of post-abortive American women experienced sexual problems that they attributed to a previous abortion.¹³

A 2008 study, *Abortion and the sexual lives of men and women: Is casual sexual behaviour more appealing and more common after abortion?* cites the following:

Fok and colleagues’ work (2006) revealed that 33.7% of women reported a post-abortion decrease in sexual desire and 26.9% indicated decreased enjoyment in

sexual activity following abortion... The authors noted that fear of pregnancy was probably not the sole reason for the less frequent activity given that various behaviors would not lead to impregnation. They specifically indicated that some couples viewed the joy of sexual activity as the origin of ‘their need to destroy a new life’; while a significant proportion also ‘felt less attractive after abortion’.¹⁴

The same 2008 study found that abortion is correlated with serious distortions in healthy attitudes toward sex:

- Among women abortion was associated with *more positive* attitudes toward sex with strangers and with *being forced* to have sex (emphasis added)
- For men the experience of a partner abortion was correlated with attitudes endorsing sex with more than one partner and with strangers
- Both men and women with an abortion experience were more likely to disagree with a statement reflecting willingness to have sex only if in love. They reported more sex partners in the last year, and were significantly more likely to have sex with a mere acquaintance
- For men, engagement in group sex, paying for sex, and purchasing or renting an x-rated video were associated with a partner abortion¹⁵

Post-abortion, men and women are less likely to associate sex with love and sex with children or longevity of relationship. “Being forced to have sex” is commonly known as rape, and it is almost inconceivable to consider how one might have a “more positive attitude” toward this.

10. Catherall, D.R. (2004). *Handbook of stress, trauma, & the family*. New York: Brunner-Routledge and Figley, C.R., Bride, B.E., Mazza, N. (1997). *Death and trauma: The traumatology of grieving*. New York: Taylor & Francis. As cited in Coleman, P.K., Rue, V.M., Spence, M. (2007). Intrapersonal Processes and Post-Abortion Relationship Challenges: A Review and Consolidation of Relevant Literature, *Internet Journal of Mental Health*, Vol. 4, No 2.

11. *Giving Sorrow Words*, p. 218.

12. Bianchi-Demicelli, F., Perrin, E., Ludicke, F., Bianchi, P.G., Chatton, D., Campana, A. (2002). Termination of pregnancy and women's sexuality. *Gynecologic and Obstetric Investigation*; 53, pp. 48-53. As cited in as cited in Coleman, P.K., Rue, V.M., Spence, M., Coyle, C.T. (2008). Abortion and the sexual lives of men and women: Is casual sexual behaviour more appealing and more common after abortion? *International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology*, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 80.

13. Rue, V.M., Coleman, P.K., Rue, J.J., Reardon, D.C. (2004). Induced abortion and traumatic stress: A preliminary comparison of American and Russian women. *Medical Science Monitor*, 10, SR5-S16. As cited in Coleman, et al. (2008). Abortion and the sexual lives of men and women: Is casual sexual behaviour more appealing and more common after abortion?

14. Fok, W.Y., Nelson Siu, S., Lau, T.K. (2006). Sexual dysfunction after a first trimester induced abortion in a Chinese population. *European Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology and Reproductive Biology*, 126, 255-258. As cited in Coleman, et al, Abortion and the sexual lives of men and women: Is casual sexual behaviour more appealing and more common after abortion?, p. 80.

Post-abortion, men and women are less likely to associate sex with love, children or longevity of relationship

MENTAL HEALTH

The state of a mother's mental health has obvious import for the health of the family.

Lee's mental health was very precarious after her abortion. Another woman, cited as Shaleena in the book *Complications*, outlines what poor mental health for a mother can do to a family:

Before, I was a healthy woman with a nice career and an adorable family. Now I feel unable to go on. I am not the only victim; my family is as well. What will happen to my children? I can't sleep, can't eat. ...My husband is ready to divorce me as I am too depressed and sick to live with. I am in constant agony...¹⁶

Dr. Priscilla Coleman concludes: "The best evidence indicates that a minimum of 10-30% of women who undergo an abortion experience pronounced and/or prolonged psychological difficulties attributable in large part to the abortion."¹⁷

One of Coleman's studies, a meta-analysis published in the very prestigious *British Journal of Psychiatry*, showed an overall 81% greater risk of mental health problems for women who had an abortion compared to those who did not.¹⁸

Another study by a psychologist in New Zealand showed that:

- 42% of post-abortive women reported major depression by age 25
- 39% of women post-abortion suffered anxiety disorders
- 27% reported experiencing suicide ideation
- 7% had alcohol dependence
- 12% were abusing drugs¹⁹

Despite this evidence, the American Psychological Association issued the following anemic statement in 2009:

The best scientific evidence indicates that the relative risk of mental health problems among adult women who have an unplanned pregnancy is no greater if they have an elective first-trimester abortion than if they deliver that pregnancy.²⁰

Few people realized that the APA cited only one study in defence of its conclusion and limited its search to studies done in the United States.²¹

In fact, the APA's wording is deliberately misleading. Their statement actually *confirms* consequences to abortion in younger women (as contrasted with "adult women"),

15. Coleman, P.K. Rue, V.M., Spence, M., Coyle, C.T. (2008). Abortion and the sexual lives of men and women: Is casual sexual behaviour more appealing and more common after abortion? *International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp 77-91.

16. *Complications*, p. 328.

17. Adler, N.E., David, H.P., Major, B.N., Roth, S.H., Russo, N.F., Wyatt, G.E. (1990). Psychological responses after abortion. *Science*, 248, pp. 41-44. Bradshaw, Z., Slade, P. (2003). The effects of induced abortion on emotional experiences and relationships: A critical review of the literature. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 23, pp. 929-958. Zolese, G., Blacker, C.V.R. (1992). The psychological complications of therapeutic abortion. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 160, pp. 742-749. Major, B., Cozzarelli, C. (1992). Psychological predictors of adjustment to abortion. *Journal of Social Issues*, 48, pp. 121-142. Major, B., Cozzarelli, C., Cooper, M.L., Zubek, J., Richards, C., Wilhite, M., Gramzow, R.H. (2000). Psychological responses of women after first-trimester abortion. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 57, pp. 777-84.

18. Coleman, P.K. (2011). Abortion and mental health: quantitative synthesis and analysis of research published 1995-2009. *British Journal of Psychiatry*; as cited in *Complications*, p. 273.

19. Fergusson, D.M., Horwood, J., Ridder, E.M. (2006). Abortion in young women and subsequent mental health. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 47, pp. 16-24.

20. The APA statement is online here: <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/abortion/>

21. Mrozek, A. (2009). Political science, Part II. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.imfcanada.org/issues/political-science-part-ii>

women who planned their pregnancies (as contrasted with “unplanned pregnancy”) and those having second and third trimester abortions (as contrasted with those having a “first-trimester abortion”).

Finally, even if we conservatively estimate only 20% of post-abortive women experience mental health problems, that still amounts to an estimated 20,000 Canadian women experiencing problems annually.²²

Lee wrote the following to the counsellors at the clinic that did her abortion:

Dear counsellor,

*It's been just over two months since my abortion. I hope you will share this with all the counsellors at the clinic. I found it an extremely difficult decision to make and was very ambivalent right up to the time of the abortion. I believed it would be an easy thing to do and I would feel primarily relieved. I certainly didn't expect to feel completely devastated, cry for weeks on end and find myself swamped full-blown grief. To try and make sense of such sadness and pain I eventually found a few books on pregnancy-related losses only to find grief following abortion covered in quite a lot of detail and certainly describing how I felt. Obviously I was not the only person to ever have reacted this way to an abortion... Now I don't know if you deliberately don't mention the possibility of such a depth of grief because it hardly ever happens OR you are not aware of it happening. If the former, then I think women have a right to know...If the latter, then I hope this letter...will change that... I realize a pro-abortion stand serves you and most women well and it is a stand with which I wholeheartedly agree, **but the deep and strong feelings that go with an abortion, especially when the woman is ambivalent or unsure, must never be trivialised, denied or ignored.**²³ (Emphasis added.)*

Post sexual revolution, “being responsible” means not getting pregnant. Yet having sex when a couple does not want a baby is not associated with being irresponsible

THE BIGGER PICTURE: ABORTION'S SOCIAL IMPACT

There is a package of problems that arrived not exclusively with legalized abortion but also with widespread use of contraception.

These two seemingly insignificant and private decisions—whether to abort or whether to prevent a pregnancy—changed the way we approach sex and children altogether. It is extraordinarily difficult to introduce the revolutionary aspects of these now banal and normal aspects of fertility to the average person on the street.

Nonetheless, the effects of this revolution are widespread and enduring. They are also agreed upon by both those who support and those who oppose the changes.²⁴

The results of the revolution are evident in that we believe we can entirely control our fertility, conjuring it up through IVF at ages approaching retirement and preventing it completely in what are biologically more fertile times.

In short, we now hold the unprecedented view that pregnancy arrives at our beck and call.

There is no longer a connection between sex and babies. So reliable is the Pill, particularly in conjunction with other methods of contraception, that preventing pregnancy is

22. Canada does not collect accurate abortion statistics because private clinics are not required to report. It is fair to assume 100,000 abortions annually. See Canadian Institute for Health Information for more details: http://www.cihi.ca/CIHI-ext-portal/pdf/internet/TA_10_ALLDATATABLE20120417_EN.

23. *Giving Sorrow Words*, p. 221.

24. Eberstadt, M. (2012). *Adam and Eve after the pill*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

associated with being “responsible.”

“Responsibility” in the post sexual revolution age now means not getting pregnant.

Having sex when a couple does not want to get pregnant is not associated with being irresponsible.

The new dogma states: If a woman gets pregnant when she didn’t want to, she obviously “failed to be responsible,” by taking appropriate preventative measures.

This stigma is described in a recent anonymous article by a young woman explaining why she had an abortion. She is in her twenties, and feels judgement from her friends (not pro-lifers, preachers or parents). She writes:

“As a young female in my early 20s who is going into the final year of her university degree this fall, the very thought of pausing my education at this moment, removing myself from my job, and feeling the judgment of *my peers for being unable to practise completely safe sex was reason enough to come to my decision.*”²⁵ (Emphasis added.)

WINNERS AND LOSERS IN AN AGE OF ABORTION

Abortion and the Pill therefore created winners and losers amongst women and men.²⁶

Amongst women, the “losers” are those who, faced with an unwanted pregnancy, would not choose abortion. They are losers for “choosing” to care for a child when they could have pursued a career path that is “more valuable.”

It was the sexual revolution that created pressure to have pre-marital sex, with no guarantee of anything approximating commitment afterwards. “[T]hose women who want children, who do not want an abortion for moral or religious reasons, or who are unreliable in their use of

contraception, may want marriage guarantees but find themselves pressured to participate in premarital sexual relations without any such assurance. They have been placed at a competitive disadvantage,” write the authors of an analysis of out of wedlock childbearing published in an economic journal.²⁷

Counter-intuitively, legalized abortion and the Pill are connected to growing the ranks of single mothers, who are more likely to be poor.

Other “losers” include the fathers who reject abortion. They cannot protect their children. The mother can have an abortion at her sole discretion.

And yet, for that very reason, many fathers feel justified in walking away from their children, because the mother had a “choice” to terminate the pregnancy. The result is more single mothers.

Single mothers are more likely to be poor. The government notices this, yet cannot easily address the relational cause of that poverty. It instead obligates fathers to support the mother of their child.

Enter government hypocrisy. The state agrees that abortion is a woman’s exclusive choice, denies men any choice and then obligates men to pay support based on the mother’s choice. In practice this very often means that men are providing for families they no longer live with, for children they often are not allowed to see, at financial levels not commensurate with what they earn. The result? Men who are disinterested in family life.

This leads to women who want to start families and can’t find any good men with whom to do so. This phenomenon is being written about fairly extensively, with one recent book on the topic called *Otherhood: Modern Women Finding a New Kind of Happiness*. In it, the author describes how it

25. Anonymous. (April 22, 2014). Weight of judgment still hangs over abortion. *The Chronicle Herald*. Retrieved from <http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1202391-weight-of-judgment-still-hangs-over-abortion>

26. This concept is referenced in *Complications*, p. 259.

27. Akerlof, G.A., Yellen, J.L. and Katz, M.L. (1996). An analysis of out-of-wedlock childbearing in the United States. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 111, No. 2, pp. 277-317. As cited in *Complications*, p. 259.

felt for her to be single and childless in her mid-thirties—a perspective aborting teens and young adults rarely, if ever, hear:

Summer rounds into fall...rounds into winter...rounds into spring...rounds into summer, and there it goes. And I'm lying in bed, and I'm crying. I'm not just crying, I'm sobbing. I'm desperately, desperately sad and alone. And I'm wondering aloud, 'What the hell happened? How did I get here?' "Can you grieve for something you don't have? And is acceptance of and moving on from a situation the equivalent of giving up?"²⁸

On a nefarious note, less-than-decent men pressure women to abort. In the seedy underbelly of the internet, you can find the tactics and strategies used.²⁹

With the lives of babies before birth falling into the choice category, the understanding of pregnancy shifts. There is still judgment and stigma associated with pregnancy today. It is newly meted out by pro-choice feminists in many cases.

OTHER SOCIAL OUTCOMES: FEWER PEOPLE

Today Canadians have small families—smaller than the desired family size.³⁰ A culture with fewer kids ceases to see kids as an asset and the world becomes less child-friendly. Consider behaviours adults curtail when children are around, like viewing pornography or swearing. Absent children, these behaviours go on, unchecked. Even the most disenfranchised teenager will put a lid on a bad attitude when faced with a bright-eyed three-year-old. Sadly, attitudes today lean toward seeing “too many” children as undesirable, difficult for families, bad for the environment, and frankly, weird.³¹

At this point we are facing a Canadian reality where in a few short years we will have more Canadians over the age of 65 than Canadians under 15.³²

It is impossible to know exactly how demographic decline will affect us. However, our social services are built in part on the idea that young people will be born and contribute to the tax base. Something will have to change—either we have more children, benefits will decrease or taxes will rise.

CONCLUSION

Women's stories and red flags raised by research reveal poor mental health, relationship failure, decreased chances for marriage, risky sexual choices, and other poor outcomes are correlated with abortion. For those able to move beyond abortion politics, the effects clearly do not lie in the imaginations of pro-life activists.

Understanding potential post-abortion outcomes helps women, men and families to better discern their choices. Lee's example, combined with reasonable research and our shared intuition and experience, can be used to dispel the false notions that abortion has no negative outcomes and secondarily, that any outcomes affect the woman and the woman alone. It is only in the world of superficial political sloganeering that these false notions live on as truth.

Lee eventually gave birth to a fourth child, a son, and wrote this:

“From great grief, pain, rage, regret has come new life, new hope, a second chance, and a beautiful baby.”³³ 🍁

28. There are many books and articles on this topic, one recent one being *Otherhood: Modern Women Finding a New Kind of Happiness* by Melanie Notkin.

A review of this book can be read here: <http://arts.nationalpost.com/2014/04/11/otherhood-by-melanie-notkin-review/>

29. Evidence of this found at <http://www.returnofkings.com/16089/how-to-convince-a-girl-to-get-an-abortion>

30. World Values Survey. (2000). Ideal number of children. Retrieved from <http://www.wvsevsdb.com/wvs/WVSAanalyze.jsp>

31. *Vie de Cirque* is a blog about large family life by mother of nine, Véronique. On occasion, she describes the hostility she faces. One recent post responds to accusations that her large family is a threat to the planet. Retrieved from <http://viedecirque.com/2014/03/17/are-we-killing-you-yet/>

32. Statistics Canada. (2012). Population Projections: Canada, the provinces and territories. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/100526/dq100526b-eng.htm>

33. *Giving Sorrow Words*, p. 234.