College Students’ Beliefs about Abortion: The Relationship Between Knowledge of Abortion and Attitudes

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Abstract

Since the legalization of abortion in 1973, abortion-related issues have been the subject of considerable psychological and sociological research. In particular, many researchers have examined attitudes toward abortion and factors that predict and explain abortion-related beliefs. An interesting area of study surrounding this topic is the relationship between knowledge of abortion and attitudes toward abortion. The current study examined the relationship between college students’ knowledge of abortion and their beliefs about abortion. The results indicated that students who were more knowledgeable about abortion-related issues also held more liberal attitudes toward abortion. This paper also discusses common misinformation students believe regarding the relationship between abortion and physical and emotional health.
College Students’ Beliefs about Abortion: The Relationship Between Knowledge of Abortion and Attitudes

Abortion is one of the most divisive social issues in current history (McAnulty & Burnette, 2004). Conflicts concerning the appropriateness of abortion continue, and this topic was a volatile and influential issue in the 2004 presidential election. Since its legalization in 1973, abortion-related issues have been the subject of considerable psychological and sociological research. In particular, many researchers have examined attitudes toward abortion and factors that predict and explain abortion-related beliefs (Esposito & Basow, 1995). Researchers have found significant correlations between abortion attitudes and religiosity, religious preference, education, age, sexual history, and personal experience with abortion (Bailey, 1993; Bryan & Freed, 1993; Carlton, Nelson, & Coleman, 2000; Esposito & Basow, 1995). An interesting area of study surrounding this topic is the relationship between knowledge of abortion and attitudes toward abortion.

Two studies have specifically examined knowledge about abortion and attitudes toward abortion. Stone and Waszak (1992) examined adolescent knowledge about and attitudes toward abortion. They found that while most participants supported the legality of abortion, they were morally opposed to abortion. These researchers also determined that teenagers’ knowledge about abortion was inaccurate. For example, they commonly believed abortions were physically dangerous, emotionally scarring, and widely illegal in the United States. One participant even suggested that legalized abortion was a response to the liberal sexual climate of Woodstock. These researchers concluded that teenagers’
attitudes toward and knowledge of abortion was heavily influenced by the right-to-life movement and religious teachings.

Esposito and Basow (1995) specifically examined the relationship between knowledge of abortion and abortion attitudes among college students. These researchers determined that attitudes toward abortion could be predicted on the basis of four variables. Religiosity had the strongest relationship with abortion attitudes followed by age, religious preference, and knowledge about abortion. In regard to knowledge, these researchers determined that those individuals who were less knowledgeable about abortion were more disapproving of this practice.

The purpose of this study was to conduct a current examination of the relationship between knowledge of abortion and attitudes toward abortion. Only two studies have examined this relationship and both were conducted approximately a decade ago. The social and political climate has changed over the past decade, and the current study was designed to investigate whether the relationship between abortion attitudes and knowledge still remained.

Furthermore, this study investigated students’ knowledge of so called “partial birth abortions.” The label “partial birth abortion” is not a medical term, but instead is a phrase created by pro-life activists to refer to a type of abortion procedure (dilation and extraction) that is infrequently used during late second-trimester or third trimester abortions (McAnulty & Burnette, 2004, pg. 314). While women can choose to have an abortion prior to fetal viability for any reason, third trimester abortions may only be performed when a woman’s health or life is at-risk or when a fetus suffers severe physical anomalies, such as hydrocephalus (Grimes, 1998). The political debate
concerning the dilation and extraction technique has dramatically intensified in recent years (McAnulty & Burnette, 2004), with many states (including Wisconsin) unsuccessfully attempting to ban the procedure. On November 3rd, 2003, President Bush signed the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act criminalizing this technique, even if it is used by physicians to preserve a woman’s health or prevent the birth of a child with severe physical abnormalities (Women’s Health Weekly, 2003, November, 27). The future of this legislation is uncertain. At present, several federal judges have issued temporary orders preventing the enforcement of the law (Lichtblau, 2004, February 12). A similar Nebraska law was found to be unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court in 2000 because it did not have a health exception for the mother and was considered to be unacceptably vague.

From this writer’s experience teaching Human Sexuality at the college level, students are more misinformed about this issue than any other abortion-related topic. For example, it is her experience that college students often believe that “partial birth” abortions are frequently performed or that women commonly choose to have third trimester abortions even if their health or life is not at risk. The current study addressed students’ knowledge of “partial birth abortion” and commonly believed myths about this procedure.

Method

Participants

Two hundred twelve undergraduate students in psychology courses (98 men and 114 women) at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville volunteered to participate.
Most students received course credit for participation, but an alternate assignment was made available for students who chose not to take part in the study. The response rate for the study was 99%.

The mean age for participants was 19.9 years ($SD = 1.53$) and 96% of the respondents were Caucasian. The most common religious affiliations endorsed by students included Catholicism (43%) and Protestantism (31%). Twenty-nine percent of students had attended religious or parochial elementary, middle, or high schools. Students were asked to indicate their level of religiosity on a six-point scale ranging from one (extremely religious) to six (atheistic). The majority of the students (52%) indicated they considered themselves to be “somewhat religious”.

In terms of relationship status, 49% of students identified themselves as single, 44% categorized themselves as “single but in a committed relationship”, 6% were engaged, and 1% were married. Fifty-two percent of participants were currently sexually active in a heterosexual relationship (defined for this study as having sexual intercourse). Of those students who were not currently sexually active, forty-three percent had been sexually active in the past.

Instrumentation

Participants completed four questionnaires addressing demographic information, knowledge of abortion, and attitudes toward abortion. Two of the measures have been previously used in abortion research and a third measure was created based on a previously used measure that was outdated. This writer created the fourth measure addressing demographics.

Abortion Attitudes Survey
The original Abortion Attitudes Survey (AAS) is a 20-item scale used to measure beliefs concerning the appropriateness of abortion (Coleman & Nelson, 1999). Participants indicate their level of agreement with abortion-related scenarios on a five-point Likert-type scale. Several questions also address opinions about the legality and accessibility of abortion-related services. Five additional items were added to this measure to address issues related to this researcher’s specific interests. To obtain a composite score, individual item scores are summed and divided by 25. A higher score indicates a pro-choice orientation and a lower score indicates a pro-life orientation.

Interest in Abortion Survey

The Interest in Abortion Survey (IAS) is an 8-item scale used to measure familiarity with and interest in abortion-related issues (Coleman & Nelson, 1999). Participants again indicate their level of agreement with statements on a five-point Likert-type scale. To obtain a composite score, individual items are summed and divided by 8. Higher scores indicate more interest and lower scores indicate lower interest.

Knowledge of Abortion Test

The Knowledge of Abortion Test (KAT) was created based on a measure constructed by Esposito and Basow (1995). The measure created by these researchers included 26 questions addressing psychological, biological, and legal knowledge of abortion-related issues. The current study altered this measure (with the permission of the authors) to reflect current statistics on abortion, as well as her own research interests. Additional questions were added to address “partial-birth abortion”, common myths about abortion, state abortion policies, and contraception-related issues. Additional questions were chosen from a variety of human sexuality textbooks and sources.
containing current information on abortion (Hyde & DeLamater, 2003; McAnulty & Burnette, 2004; Parker-Pope, 2003, October 28; Westheimer & Lopator, 2002). This revised measure was piloted on two undergraduate psychology classes. In addition, it was reviewed by a physician’s assistant with expertise in women’s health and a psychology professor with expertise in human sexuality. The final measure contained 30 questions, 12 of which were retained from Esposito and Basow’s (1995) original measure. Scores on the measure could range from 0 (no items correct) to 30 (all items correct). Three additional questions addressing “partial-birth abortion” using an alternative format were included at the end of this measure.

Results

Students were asked a variety of questions regarding where they obtained their knowledge about abortion. Thirty-nine percent of students reported their primary source of information about abortion was school, with 90% of students indicating abortion was discussed in their health education courses in high school or middle school. Following school, the media (newspapers, television news programs, magazines, the Internet) was listed by 37% of students as primary sources of information. Although 40% of participants indicated abortion was discussed in their religious education courses, only 2% of participants reported that their places of worship were primary sources of knowledge. Students also indicated they learned about abortion through personal experience or through discussing the topic with friends. Over half of the participants (55%) reported either knowing someone who had undergone the procedure or indicated they had had an abortion themselves.
Attitudes toward Abortion

Beliefs concerning the appropriateness of abortion were measured by the AAS. Students were most supportive of abortion in cases where a woman’s life or health was endangered due to her pregnancy (with 83% agreeing that abortion is acceptable if a woman’s life was endangered and 74% agreeing if her health was endangered). Students were also largely supportive of abortion in cases of rape or incest (with 71% of participants agreeing that abortion is acceptable). Over half (52%) of participants believed that abortion was acceptable when a fetus had a severe physical abnormality which would compromise quality of life or result in death prior to birth or shortly thereafter.

Students were least supportive of abortion when it was used as a method of birth control, with only 2% of students agreeing abortion was acceptable in these cases. Abortion was also viewed as largely unacceptable when an unwanted pregnancy would be a source of social embarrassment (9% of students agreeing abortion was acceptable), when a child was perceived as a threat to the soundness of a couple’s relationship (10% agreeing abortion was acceptable), and when a female simply does not want to be a mother (16% agreeing abortion was acceptable).

In terms of legality of abortion, 47% of students believed abortion should remain legal, 29% believed abortion should not remain legal, and 24% neither agreed nor disagreed. Female participants had slightly more liberal attitudes toward abortion ($M = 66.78, \text{SD} = 23.1$) than males ($M = 62.74, \text{SD} = 19.75$), but this difference was not statistically significant, $t(205) = -1.35, p = .18$. 
**Interest in Abortion**

As a whole, students did not indicate a strong interest in abortion-related issues. The IAS measured student interest in abortion by asking participants to indicate their level of agreement with eight statements (such as “Abortion is an issue which influences how I vote in government elections”). Scores on each question ranged from one – strongly disagree to five – strongly agree. The average score on this measure was a 3.02 ($SD = .91$), suggesting a moderate level of interest in abortion. Female participants reported significantly higher levels of interest in abortion than males ($Female\ mean = 25.48$, $SD = 4.75$; $male\ mean = 22.83$, $SD = 5.02$; $t(210) = -3.96$, $p \leq .001$).

**Knowledge of Abortion**

On average, students answered 41% of the questions correctly on the KAT. An examination of commonly missed questions on this instrument highlights frequently believed myths regarding abortion. Interestingly, students most commonly erroneously answered questions regarding the emotional sequela of abortion. For instance, ninety-one percent of participants reported that women would experience long-term negative psychological effects after having an abortion, when research overwhelmingly indicates abortion is not associated with any long term negative emotional consequences (Adler et al., 1992). The vast majority of participants (90%) also guessed that the primary emotion experienced by women immediately after undergoing an abortion would be either guilt, sadness, or regret, when the primary emotion reported is generally relief (Esposito and Basow, 1995). Only 10% of students correctly indicated that the majority of women undergoing abortions would make the same decision again if faced with similar circumstances. Participants also frequently missed questions pertaining to the medical
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risks of abortion. For instance, only 19% of participants correctly indicated that compared to carrying a baby to full term and delivering a baby, legal abortion has significantly fewer physical and medical risks. Likewise, only 20% of participants correctly responded that since abortion became legal in the United States in 1973, the number of maternal abortion-related deaths has dramatically decreased. Students also commonly overestimated the chances of medical complications (such as excessive bleeding or infection) occurring during first trimester abortions and believed that having an abortion increased a female’s risk of becoming infertile.

Scores on the KAT were significantly positively correlated with scores on the AAS, indicating that participants who were more knowledgeable about abortion-related issues possessed more liberal attitudes toward abortion ($r(207) = .27, p<.001$). Scores on the KAT were also significantly positively correlated with the IAS, indicating that students who were more interested in abortion were more knowledgeable about it ($r(212) = .27, p=.001$). Participants who were more knowledgeable of abortion were also less religious ($r(209) = -.19, p<.01$). In terms of attitudes toward abortion, students with more liberal attitudes toward abortion were less religious ($r(204) = -.38, p<.001$) and were less likely to have known someone who had undergone an abortion ($r(203) = .17, p <.05$). There was no significant correlation between attitudes toward abortion and interest in abortion ($r(207)=.097, p = .162$).

Partial Birth Abortion

Seventy-six percent of students reported they had heard of the term “partial-birth abortion” prior to participating in this study. The majority of students reported they had been exposed to this term either through school (49%) or through the media (37%).
Although they were familiar with the phrase, few students could give an accurate definition of the procedure. Some definitions even illustrated a profound misunderstanding of the term. For example, one student defined “partial-birth abortion” as “[g]iving you more time, like reading books or magazines to make sure you want to go all the way with abortion.” Other definitions illustrated that students’ understanding of this procedure had been colored by the media’s and politicians’ barbaric descriptions of the technique. In terms of accuracy of knowledge, students were apt to exaggerate the frequency of this type of procedure with only 18% correctly indicating that approximately one out of every 15,000 abortions is a “partial-birth abortion.”

Discussion

This study examined college students’ attitudes toward abortion and students’ knowledge of abortion-related issues. The results indicated that students who were more knowledgeable of abortion also held more liberal attitudes toward abortion. This study also highlighted commonly believed myths regarding abortion. In general, students were more apt to overestimate the negative psychological effects of abortion and exaggerate the medical risks of the procedure.

An interesting follow-up question related to these issues is whether students’ attitudes and beliefs about abortion change as they gain more accurate information on this topic. A typical college human sexuality course contains a one to two week segment addressing abortion. Future research could examine if students’ attitudes toward abortion change as their knowledge of abortion-related topics increase.
Benefits of Research

This research has benefited me greatly because I teach Psychology of Human Sexuality at UW-P. I have always been curious about students’ beliefs regarding abortion, and how their opinions on abortion relate to their knowledge of abortion. In teaching this course, I have always felt that more informed students have more liberal opinions about abortion, but now I have quantitative data supporting my viewpoint. I am currently conducting a follow-up study designed to address similar issues. In this study, I am examining how (and if) students’ beliefs regarding abortion change over the course of taking the human sexuality class. I am specifically interested in learning if students’ beliefs become more liberal over the course of the semester as they gain knowledge on this topic.

I am planning on sharing the results of this research with my colleagues at UW-Ps annual research day (March 3, 2005). I will also submit this research to be presented at the American Psychological Association’s annual convention in August 2006.
Resources


