

Profile of A Woman With An Unplanned Pregnancy

Recently there has been research done on the psychology of pro-choice women. I quote here extensively from an article called "Abortion: A Failure to Communicate" by Paul Swope. Mr. Swope is the Northeast Project Director of the Caring Foundation and President of LifeNet Services, Inc. In the article Mr. Swope details the findings of the research and then links it to the media communication that the Caring Foundation has been conducting in various States. You may obtain a complete copy of this article by writing to the Caring Foundation, 10 Park Avenue, Derry, NH 03038-2114.

The information outlined in this article challenges us in the Pregnancy Center ministry with information that may be new to some, yet confirm for others what we have been learning all along as we have ministered to women over the last two decades. It is appropriate to include this information here, in this section of the manual. Before we believe we have anything to say to a woman, we must know who she is and the forces, thoughts, and pressures that are behind her decision-making processes, especially if we hope to continue to reach out to abortion-vulnerable women and affect the abortion rate in this country.

For twenty-five years the pro-life movement has stood up to defend perhaps the most crucial principle in any civilized society, namely, the sanctity and value of every human life. However, neither the profundity and scale of the cause, nor the integrity of those who work to support it, necessarily translates into effective action. Recent research on the psychology of pro-choice women offers insight into why the pro-life movement has not been as effective as it might have been in persuading women to choose life; it also offers opportunities to improve dramatically the scope and influence of the pro-life message, particularly among women of childbearing age.

This research suggests that modern American women of childbearing age do not view the abortion issue within the same moral framework as those of us who are pro-life activists. Our message is not being well-received by this audience because we have made the error of assuming that women, especially those facing the trauma of an unplanned pregnancy, will respond to principles we see as self-evident within our own moral framework, and we have presented our arguments accordingly. This is a miscalculation that has fatally handicapped the pro-life cause. While we may not agree with how women currently evaluate this issue, the importance of our mission and the imperative to be effective demands that we listen, that we understand, and that we respond to the actual concerns of women who are most likely to choose abortion.

The importance of a new approach became clear from the results of sophisticated research pioneered by

the Caring Foundation, a group that presents the pro-life message to the public via television. This group has been able to tap into some of the most advanced psychological research available today, so-called "right brain" research...

The right side of the brain is thought to control the emotional, intuitive, creative aspect of the person. Whereas most research involves analytic, rational questions and thus draws responses primarily from the left side of the brain, "right brain" research aims to uncover the underlying emotional reasons why we make particular decisions or hold certain beliefs. Such an approach has obvious application to an issue such as abortion, as a woman in the grips of a crisis pregnancy certainly does not resolve this issue in a cold, logical, "left-brain" manner.

These studies were carried out by a national leader in this type of research, one that has worked with companies such as General Motors, Ford, Coca-Cola, Toyota, Whirlpool, ABC Television, Federal Express, GTE, Saturn Corporation, Maybelline and the Department of Defense. The technique used is a series of in-depth, one-on-one interviews that utilize visualization, repetition, and relaxation to evoke deep-seated emotional responses to a given topic. The results of these studies, which were conducted in 1994 and 1997, can be accepted at a better than 95 percent confidence level.

One objective of the research was to answer a question that has baffled pro-life activists for some time. How can women and the public in general, be comfortable with being against abortion personally but

in favor of keeping it legal? Because pro-lifers find it morally obvious that one cannot simultaneously hold that “abortion is killing” and “abortion should be legal,” they have tended to assume that people need only to be shown more clearly that the fetus is a baby. They assume that if the humanity of the unborn is understood, the consequent moral imperative, “killing a baby is wrong,” will naturally follow, and women will choose life for their unborn children. This orientation has framed much of the argument by pro-lifers for over two decades, with frustratingly little impact.

The new research shows why the traditional approach has had so little effect, and what can be done to change things.

The summary report of the study bears the intriguing title: “Abortion: The Least Of Three Evils – Understanding the Psychological Dynamics of How Women Feel About Abortion.” The report suggests that women do not see any “good” resulting from an unplanned pregnancy. Instead they must weigh what they perceive as three “evils,” namely, motherhood, adoption, and abortion.

Unplanned motherhood, according to the study represents a threat so great to modern women that it is perceived as equivalent to a “death of self.” While the woman may rationally understand this is not her own literal death, her emotional, subconscious reaction to carrying the child to term is that her life will be “over.” This is because many young women of today have developed a self-identity that simply does not include being a mother. It may include going through college, getting a degree, obtaining a good job, even getting married someday; but the sudden intrusion of motherhood is perceived as a complete loss of control over their present and future selves. It shatters their sense of who they are and will become, and thereby paralyzes their ability to think more rationally or realistically.

When these women evaluate the abortion decision, therefore, they do not, as a pro-lifer might, formulate the problem with the radically distinct options of either “I must endure an embarrassing pregnancy” or “I must destroy the life of an innocent child.” Instead, their perception of the choice is either “my life is over” or “the life of this new child is over.” Given this perspective, the choice of abortion becomes one of self-preservation, a much more defensible position, both to the woman deciding to abort and to those supporting her decision.

Even those women who are likely to choose life

rather than abortion do so not because they better understand fetology or have a greater love for children, but because they have a broader and less fragile sense of self, and they can better incorporate motherhood into their self-identity.

Adoption, unfortunately, is seen as the most “evil” of the three options, as it is perceived as a kind of double death. First, the death of self, as the woman would have to accept motherhood by carrying the baby to term. Further, not only would the woman be a mother, but she would perceive herself as a bad mother, one who gave her own child away to strangers. The second death is the death of the child “through abandonment.” A woman worries about the chance of her child being abused. She is further haunted by the uncertainty of the child’s future, and about the possibility of the child returning to intrude on her own life many years later. Basically, a woman desperately wants a sense of resolution to her crisis, and in her mind, adoption leaves the situation the most unresolved, with uncertainty and guilt as far as she can see for both herself and her child. As much as we might like to see the slogan “Adoption Not Abortion” embraced by women, this study suggests that in pitting adoption against abortion, adoption will be the hands-down loser.

The attitude of these women toward abortion is quite surprising. First, all of the scores of women involved in the study (none of whom were pro-life activists and all of whom called themselves “pro-choice”) agreed that abortion is killing. While this is something that is no doubt “written on the human heart,” credit for driving home the reality of abortion is also due to the persevering educational work of the pro-life movement. Second, the women believe that abortion is wrong, an evil, and that God will punish a woman who makes that choice. Third, however, these women feel that God will ultimately forgive the woman, because He is a forgiving God, because the woman did not intend to get pregnant, and finally, because a woman in such crisis has no real choice—again, the perception is that the woman’s whole life is at stake.

In fact, while abortion itself is seen as something evil, the woman who has to make that choice is perceived as being courageous, because she has made a difficult, costly, but necessary decision in order to get on with her life. Basically, abortion is considered the least of three evils because it is perceived as offering the greatest hope for a woman to preserve her own sense of self, her own life. This is why women feel protective

towards the abortive woman and her “right to choose,” and deeply resentful towards the pro-life movement, which they perceive as uncaring and judgmental.

Note that the primary concerns in any of the three options revolve around the woman, and not the unborn child. This helps explain the appeal of the rhetoric of “choice.” It offers the sense that women in crisis still have some control over their future, and it allows women who may dislike abortion themselves to still seem compassionate towards other women in crisis.

These insights also shed light on another fundamental source of frustration and failure in the pro-life movement. A quarter century of polling has shown over and over that most Americans oppose most abortions, and that women are slightly more pro-life than men. Yet Americans are increasingly comfortable with the pro-choice rather than the pro-life label, and pro-life activists are still viewed as dangerous extremists. Is this due entirely to media bias? Why is it that the pro-life movement has not been able to build on the innate pro-life sentiment of the average person, and may even be losing ground in the arena of public opinion?

Results from this study suggest that the difficulty in gaining public support is not due entirely to unfair treatment by the media, although such treatment has no doubt played a significant role. The pro-life movement’s own self-chosen slogans and educational presentations have tended to exacerbate the problem, as they focus almost exclusively on the unborn child, not the mother. This tends to build resentment, not sympathy, particularly among women of childbearing age.

It is not surprising that the first people in the pro-life community to notice the need for a different approach were those who actually work with women in crisis. When crisis pregnancy centers first sprang up across the country, for example, they chose names such as “Home for the Little Ones” or “New Life Ministries.” Today you will see names such as “A Woman’s Concern” or “Lighthouse for Women.”

In contrast, consider a common pro-life slogan: “Abortion Stops A Beating Heart.” While this may be an effective phrase among pro-lifers, the effect upon a young woman in crisis would probably be to: 1. provoke anger at the messenger (pro-lifers), 2. confirm her sense that pro-lifers ignore her life and situation, and 3. drive her further into denial and despair. If the pro-life goal is to lower the abortion rate and not just to state an objective fact, we have to ask whether such a message may well be counterproductive.

When a woman faces an unplanned pregnancy, her main question is not “Is this a baby?”—with the assumed consequence that if she knows it to be so she will choose life. Women know, though often at a subconscious level, that the fetus is human, and that it will be killed by abortion. But that is the price a woman in that situation is willing to pay in her desperate struggle for what she believes to be her very survival. Emphasis on babies, whether dismembered fetuses or happy newborns, will tend to deepen the woman’s sense of denial, isolation, and despair; the very emotions that will lead her to choose abortion.

Her central, perhaps subconscious, question is rather, “How can I preserve my own life?” The pro-life movement must address her side of the equation, and do so in a compassionate manner that affirms her own inner convictions. Without stigmatizing or condemning, pro-lifers must help a woman to reevaluate what she perceives as the three “evils” before her.”

The article goes on to give examples of how this is achieved through ads shown on television. One television ad offers a role model of a woman who can identify with the concerns of the target audience but has chosen life and presents it in a positive light. The other ad presents abortion, again framed from the woman’s own perspective, as a negative resolution to her crisis. Mr. Swope addresses the effectiveness of the ads.

“...In Missouri where the ads have been airing for a number of years, that State has had the fastest dropping abortion rate in the United States—almost six times the national average. From 1988 to 1992 the abortion rate dropped just 5 percent nationally, but 29 percent in Missouri. In addition to the falling abortion rate, recent polls of teens in the Kansas City, Missouri, area also suggest a pro-life sentiment that is dramatically different from the midwest average. Whereas a Gallup poll showed teens in the midwest mirroring the national average of 29 percent of youths who are strongly pro-life, a 1996 poll of over seven thousand students from Missouri showed over 60 percent of the teens to be strongly pro-life.”

Many Pregnancy Centers have reaped the benefits of such ads when they include an 800 number which connects callers to Pregnancy Centers in their area.

Pregnancy Centers are reaping the benefits, through increased clients, as a result of advertising that speaks directly to women’s needs and perspectives. The challenge is for the Pregnancy Center ministry to be consistent with that message once a client arrives. If an

ad, by its nature and content, offers nonjudgmental, non-cliché, woman-focused insight and understanding into her situation and then offers her continued help at a Pregnancy Center, we better be able to deliver the services.

We can no longer be driven only by our own pro-life understanding and moral perspective. Jesus, by his command, calls us to reach out to women in unplanned pregnancies. Jesus, by his example, calls us to minister to the women he sends us within their own cultural context and out of a compassion and understanding of her questions and fears.

After quoting the positive responses of women to the television ads and actual quotes from women who have been directly (positively) affected by these ads he concludes by saying:

“These responses suggest that a campaign of carefully produced ads could encourage a “culture of life” ethic. Using language and imagery that will attract rather than alienate, the pro-life movement must show

that abortion is actually not in a woman’s self-interest, and that the choice of life offers hope and a positive, expanded sense of self.

...The terrible miscalculation of young women is that abortion can make them “unpregnant,” that it will restore them to who they were before their crisis. But a woman is never the same once she is pregnant, whether the child is kept, adopted or killed. Abortion may be a kind of resolution, but it is not the one the woman most deeply longs for, nor will it even preserve her sense of self. If those of us in the pro-life movement can help women see this for themselves, we will have done much to disengage our culture from the abortion mentality.

If pro-lifers are willing to reframe the debate in a way that affected women can better understand and appreciate, the movement can regain the moral high ground in the mind of the American public, and begin to reach successfully the very women who most need the pro-life message.”

