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Conceptualizing a Feminine Self Through Post-Abortion Discourses:  
An Analysis of Subjectivity and Power Relations

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Sociology and Anthropology

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## ABSTRACT

### Conceptualizing a Feminine Self Through Post-Abortion Discourses: An Analysis of Subjectivity and Power Relations

Jessica Gallant

The experience of having an abortion has been constructed in a particular way. The literature and narratives surrounding responses to abortion tends to revolve around the emotional aspects, specifically negative emotional aspects, of an abortion experience. These discourses play an important role in shaping or re-shaping the specific, gendered subjectivities of women that experienced an abortion.

In this thesis, I examine the representation of an abortion experience as one that is 'traumatic' in a woman's life. Specifically, I analyze the framework that shapes and reflects the way abortion is perceived in our culture. Traditional notions of femininity and the characteristics that constitute a feminine subjectivity are articulated through post-abortion discourses. Therefore, I argue that post-abortion discourses engage in a dialogue that perpetuates a particular discursive framework about abortion. Using a social constructionist perspective I argue that experiences of abortion are constructed in such a way that it is perceived as a 'traumatic' experience for a woman to have an abortion. I use three different websites and one book to explicate how idealized notions of femininity shape women's subjectivities.

I conduct an in-depth analysis of these websites and the book and relate to power relations, subjectivity and 'truth.' I use Michel Foucault's conceptualization of power

and discourse as a basis for setting my arguments and I compliment my research by using different feminist theorists to explicate the processes involved in shaping women's experiences in our culture. I conclude by noting the limitations to my research as well as indications for further research.

## DEDICATION

### Grand-Maman

Ta passion, ta force exceptionnelle ainsi que ta présence dans ma vie, ont inspiré la jeune femme que je suis, à pousser plus loin les limites de ce que je croyais comprendre.

### Nanny

A woman with a strong will that would prove to rise above many challenges. I am thankful for the lessons I have learned from you.

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Mom and Dad, thank you your enduring support, love and encouragement through all of my years in school. You always believed in me and provided me with all that I needed to excel and push beyond my limits. You are the reason I dream big! Jay, the fulfillment of your own dream of becoming a police officer helped inspire me to achieve this goal. Your unconditional love and support encouraged me in my darkest moments.



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## Introduction

“If you are a woman who does not possess a strong sense of yourself, challenging situations that occur in adulthood, like the resolution of an unwanted pregnancy, can create enormous internal anxiety, tension, and toxic guilt.” – (De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 91)

There are countless stories of post-abortion grief (distress) displayed on Internet websites as well as in numerous books on the topic. The stories are about women who have experienced an abortion (sometimes multiple abortions) in their lifetimes. They explain the range of emotions associated with experiencing an abortion. These emotions range from relief, sadness, grief, regret, to anger. Some of the experiences include an overall sense of conflict whereby a woman faced with an unwanted pregnancy is also faced with the pressure of making the ‘right’ choice for her self, her family, and even contending with her own sense of morality, religion and politics. Once the decision is made to abort, many women express conflicting feelings construing the experience of abortion as a powerful and significant one in a woman’s life. The recounting of these experiences reveals some of the complex underlying issues that abortion evokes in our culture; that is, they reflect strong moral and political stances.

According to many narratives shared on different Internet websites, the impact of having an abortion is significant in a woman’s life. It affects her sense of *self*, including her self-esteem, her identity, her relationships, her behavior, as well as her ability to cope with

other major events that occur in her life.<sup>1</sup> The following story some of the issues one woman copes with before and after her abortion. Her name is Brenda and her story is located on the “Hope After Abortion” website.

**Brenda's Story:**

I kept the abortion a secret. I told the father and the people in Kansas that knew I was pregnant that I had miscarried. After the abortion, I hated men and seduced the baby's father back into a relationship and then dumped him when he thought we were going to have intercourse--telling him just what I thought of him. I continued that behavior with a lot of guys that I would meet in the bar.

I spent eight years after the abortion in destructive behaviors. I went to three different secular counselors, never telling them about the baby. I got off of antidepressants only two years ago. I am receiving counseling now at Birth Choice and hope to eventually be able to counsel others. I have judged myself guilty of murder for 21 years. I had received God's grace and forgiveness for my many sins, but I could not forgive myself, especially since I knew it was a baby. There is no statement strong enough to explain what it is like for a mother to kill her baby.

My counseling and healing continue to progress. For the first time in 21 years, I don't feel shame and guilt. I'm sad about the abortion, and I am sorry I was in sin, but I have finally been able to grieve for my aborted baby and can think of him without horror.<sup>2</sup>

Brenda's story is not uncommon in post-abortion discourses, even years after the actual abortion experience. Her overall sense of guilt, shame, and yearning for forgiveness echoes the sentiments experienced by many other 'post-abortive' women. Some of the main characteristics that emerge from the narrative above are identifiable through Brenda's classification of her abortion as a *sin* as well as her clearly defined notion or

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<sup>1</sup> The 'self,' as I illustrate here can be interpreted as the part of the person's conception of identity. It is the relation of oneself to oneself where Foucault draws upon historical conceptualizations of notions of the self, relating to how an individual relates to oneself as "an object of knowledge and a field of action." (Foucault, 1986: 42) For example, it is the part of the person that is acted upon through "techniques of the self." (Martin et al., 1988) This identity is shaped by numerous factors; they include (but are not exclusive to): social norms and in the case of post-abortion, relations of self are guided by and through knowledge of emotions or feelings, sense of morality, sexuality, etc.

<sup>2</sup> 'Understanding Abortion's Aftermath.' 2000. Accessed from The World Wide Web March 20, 2005. <<http://www.hopeafterabortion.com/hope.cfm?sel=A31Q>> See "Brenda's" story.

conceptualization of a 'baby' and what having an abortion does to the 'baby.' In addition, Brenda's behaviors and sense of self are altered in response to her unwanted pregnancy. She describes periods where she effectively sought out men to deliberately hurt them, transposing her negative feelings about her abortion experience onto her relationships with men, and possibly others. Her sense of self and of what is 'right' is evidently shaken. Brenda's story reflects the overall difficulty associated with making such a decision; it reflects, in many ways, the conflicting issues associated with abortion as well as reflecting the ways abortion and post-abortion are framed in our society.

I was inspired to write on this topic by reading a number of stories like Brenda's. My initial interests about the construction of the abortion experience directed me to different websites and books dealing with the issue. My primary objective in this thesis is to explore aspects of the discursive framework that bound abortion as an experience that is constructed as difficult, traumatic, regretful, and life altering. Abortion seems to be discursively framed in a way that shapes the experience of abortion as one that permeates every aspect of a woman's being (i.e. understanding of who she is, who she has become.) Women are constructed as, and construct themselves to be fragmented beings; they associate their sense of self with the 'sin' of having procured an abortion, and then struggle with the contention of becoming 'whole' again. Reading these narratives led me to ask whether this was the only way to think about post-abortion or the abortion experience in general. How is it that trauma and fear have come to assume the status of 'truth' – the only way that the abortion experience can be understood? What would be the purpose of this truth? These thoughts have fueled my initial motivation to write on

this topic and have contributed to the development of the following key research questions: How is the post-abortion experience framed and more specifically, what are the elements that frame the experience of abortion? What is the constitution of these discourses in terms of their relation to gender, subjectivity and motherhood? How are notions of gender and mothering sustaining the particular framing of an abortion experience as a traumatic, life changing, and difficult experience?

What is important to me is not necessarily the dispute that abortion causes certain responses ('negative' or 'positive') but rather, I am interested in the characteristics that shape the social construction of these responses as well as the socio-historical contexts in which these ideas are shaped.

It is fairly clear throughout the literature on abortion that persistent, traditional conceptualizations of women and idealizations of motherhood continue to impact the way abortion is constructed in our culture. I argue from a perspective that takes into consideration the socio-historical elements as key factors in the shaping of one's experiences. In regards to women's responses to abortion, it is clear within the literature that numerous socio-historical factors are neglected. This is reflected in regards to the focus of psychological literature and their examinations of abortion responses related to very specific criteria surrounding mental health at the individual level. Though this kind of literature dominates current research on post-abortion issues, it fails to adequately consider the socio-historical elements in regards to the shaping of women's post-abortion experiences. Some of the competing literature suggests that the current dominant forms

of research on post-abortion responses is biased and politically charged. Some of this literature deals with different issues related to post-abortion concerns, for example, there have been different research studies examining whether there is a link between having an abortion and breast cancer, increased suicide rates, and increased risk of mental illness.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to these more 'negative' narratives, other stories might include women conceptualizing their abortion experiences in a more positive manner; that is, responses like relief, empowerment, happiness, experiencing a kind of liberation, etc.

With this said however, there are indications that these (more 'positive') elements are emerging more frequently, especially in sociological literature. Like many researchers have pointed out in recent years, abortion is consistently framed within a specific context that reflects 'negative' characteristics of abortion experiences because of numerous factors including our cultural conceptualizations of motherhood and being woman, as well as the perpetuation of our institutional and structural processes grounded in paternalistic values and norms. Rosalind P. Petchesky writes about women's consciousness in relation to abortion and notes that despite the notion that women are bound by social pressures and common conceptualizations of abortions as 'bad,' women nonetheless choose abortions for themselves and somehow reconcile their own views about what is 'right' for them and society's views about what is morally 'right.' She offers the kind of space needed to theorize and represent the diverse angles of women's experiences with abortion.

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<sup>3</sup>For more information on these issues, see different studies conducted by L.I. Remennick, H.L. Howe, Mika Gissler, and David C. Reardon.



Furthermore, it is clear that when abortion arises in political debates, social commentary, or even in simple conversations, it incites impassioned responses from all sides of the issues that abortion presents. My goal is not to elaborate on the political motivations of one social movement or another (namely the ‘pro-choice’ and ‘pro-life’ movements) but rather to examine more closely a specific kind of knowledge that focuses on post-abortion issues. This knowledge, what I term “post-abortion discourses” deals with numerous issues relating to the experience of having had an abortion and they are tied, in large part, to understanding one’s own and other women’s emotional and psychological reactions experienced after having procured an abortion.

The physical responses following an abortion procedure have, at this point in time, acquired a general consensus from different medical experts in regards to the scientific research evidence consistently reporting that legal abortions are extremely safe and pose minimal risk to women’s physiological health.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the debates surrounding post-abortion issues are propelled in the direction of psychological or emotional responses after an abortion. The debate lies precisely in “the question of the existence and nature of negative psychological consequences resulting from the abortion procedure.” (Parrott and Condit, 1997: 35)

I argue that post-abortion discourses engage in a dialogue that perpetuates a particular discursive framework about abortion. I argue from a social constructionist perspective

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<sup>4</sup> In this sense, ‘legal’ abortions refer to medical abortions; abortions performed by medical doctors in hospitals or clinics. Abortions performed in medical settings, by medical professionals, are considered to be the safest method of aborting in our culture. In contrast, ‘illegal’ abortions (i.e. so-called ‘back-alley’ abortions) have often resulted in extreme sickness or even death for many women.

whereby experiences of abortion are constructed in such a way that it is perceived as a 'traumatic' experience for a woman to have an abortion. It is considered a difficult decision, one that often 'torments' the woman because she would likely *want* to have the 'baby' under the *right* circumstances. In addition, these kinds of discourses perpetuate the gendered, normative assumptions of what it means to be woman and/or mother.

I also argue that the discourses are involved in power relations through their very constitutional elements. For example, power relations are exercised through the interactional processes involved between the reader (woman) and the texts. The woman is involved in a complex relation with the text as she is compelled to examine her *self*, and work towards altering and ultimately transforming her *self* into what is conceived of as a 'better and happier person.' This thesis is an in-depth analysis of the subjectivity of women as it is characterized and reinforced through the discourses. The post-abortion discourses I am analyzing constitute subjectivity within very specific parameters. For example, the post-abortion discourses I have chosen to analyze tend to convey traditional messages regarding the subjectivity of women. By this, I mean that they tend to situate the subjectivity of women within a specific set of normative values that surround the way we, in our culture, have come to understand women; that is, through traditional representations of femininity and motherhood.

My analysis of these particular discourses will reveal that there are important links that can be drawn between these discourses to the way the abortion experience is constructed. For example, I argue that this body of knowledge helps to construct the abortion

experience in a particular way; that it is constructed *through* and *by* a set of traditional, gendered values that have and continue to dominate various social processes including the way we govern our *selves*, as well as the kinds of policies and regulations that we, in our contemporary society, support.

I chose to explore this topic because I wanted to gain a more in-depth understanding of the ways in which we, in our culture, have come to understand and conceptualize an abortion experience. Abortions are not a rare occurrence; they are regularly performed in hospitals and clinics across Canada. Many Canadian women are choosing “induced” or “therapeutic” abortions each year.<sup>5</sup> Statistics Canada reports that there were “105,427 abortions in 2000” which indicates “a slight decrease [in the prevalence of induced abortions] of 0.2% from 15,666 in 1999.” (The Daily: March 28, 2003) Despite this slight decrease, abortions are nonetheless a rather common occurrence among Canadian women. More specifically, “the rate of abortion remained steady at 15.4 abortions per 1000 women in both 1999 and 2000.” (The Daily: March 28, 2004) The everyday occurrence of abortion as a somewhat regular event in Canadian society offers one very good reason to examine its discursive construction more carefully.

Choosing to have an abortion is often described as ‘one of the most important and difficult choices a woman can make in her life.’ Her decision to abort is shaped by many factors including religion, social mores, family values and gender norms. Different

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<sup>5</sup> The terms “induced” and “therapeutic” are used interchangeably to indicate that this is a *voluntary* abortion as compared to a “spontaneous” abortion or what is better known as a “miscarriage.”

meanings are attached to abortion in our culture and they transcend the social to reach the intimate spaces of thought and expression at the individual level. For instance, different images and words enter my mind when I think of abortion. Some are quite negative and even harsh, such as ‘killing the fetus’, ‘extraction of a fetus’ and so forth. On a more positive note, I can think of ‘opportunity’, ‘freedom,’ and ‘choice.’ The words that arise in my mind are not solely reflections of my thoughts and/or opinions about the topic at hand. Rather, I argue that they are reflections of exposure to different forms of knowledge and ‘truths’ that often occupy contradictory spaces in my thoughts. Regardless of the essence of the specific thoughts I have about abortion as an individual, I recognize that the various social processes of which I am a part *inform* these thoughts. My thoughts are informed by my own experiences as a woman, as well as the institutional and structural relations I participate with in my culture. So it is, I would argue, for every woman who chooses to have an abortion.

I would like to note from the onset of this thesis that I fully acknowledge that different women undoubtedly experience *very real* emotional reactions after having had an abortion. Some women experience relief, happiness, empowerment and so forth. I do not in any way discredit the feelings of those women who experience grief, anger, sadness and the like but rather, I stress the *significance* of recognizing the *diversity* of women’s experiences with abortion. Although I talk about women as a unified group, I wish to acknowledge that different women experience daily living differently. Therefore, as I refer to women as a group, I am referring specifically to women that live in North

America, whereby these post-abortion discourses are prevalent. The North American context is also the standard I refer to when I mention culture or cultural practices.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

This chapter provides a brief overview of the history of abortion in Canada and the United States. A closer look at the key historical elements, the laws surrounding abortion, and their social implications in relation to abortion is necessary in order to attain a deeper, more meaningful conceptualization of the cultural context that continues to shape our common understanding of abortion in general. Abortion has a long history of moral, political, as well as legal debate in our culture. The following sections will outline the key historical elements of Canadian abortion legislation, as well as a brief history of the pivotal influences from the United States.

### History of Abortion

It has been clearly and extensively documented that abortions have been practiced for centuries all across the world. Women across all geographical and cultural spans have been procuring abortions in some form or another. Women have sought abortions despite the social, cultural, political and/or religious obstacles they faced. In most countries across the world, abortions were illegal (and some still are) at some point in time, yet countless women still choose to terminate their pregnancies, defying all rules and regulations imposed upon them and their reproductive choices. Women continue to acquire abortions in secrecy and shame through illegal, so-called “back-alley” abortions. Furthermore, abortion is a bi-partisan issue that raises tension between many people and it continues to divide people on issues of ethics, morality, politics, and religion.

Canada's history on the abortion issue represents much of the same issues and challenges faced by other countries across the world. The following paragraphs focus on a Canadian historical discussion surrounding pivotal laws and key figures in the abortion debate. I present this brief historical discussion because my analysis of post-abortion discourses necessitates an informed contextualization of how abortion has been perceived and interpreted within our cultural practices, and how these interpretations continue to shape the way we understand abortion and all issues surrounding it.

Canada officially criminalized abortion in 1869 whereby seeking an abortion could lead to "a penalty of life imprisonment."<sup>6</sup> The criminalization of abortion coincided with the general sentiment towards reproductive issues (i.e. birth control) at that time in Canadian society. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were laden with Victorian/Christian influences and ideologies. These influences reinforced a more traditional outlook on moral values and reproductive issues. This period accentuated a sense of moral order and righteousness in regards to the role of women in society. Women's social roles were mainly restricted to upholding a successful and *faithful* marriage, and being a *good* mother. Societal norms and values, based on paternalistic ideologies, dictated what constituted a 'proper' woman and 'good' mother. These norms were further reinforced by other regulatory practices, namely those of psychologists and psychiatrists. In relation to the female social condition, psychologists and psychiatrists supported the regulation of women's behaviors by diagnosing women with various mental health issues or illnesses when they (women) deviated from the standards set out

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<sup>6</sup>'Chronology of Court Cases.' Accessed from the World Wide Web March 6, 2005.  
<<http://cbctrust.com/homepage.html>> see section: Chronology of Court Cases.

for them to follow. Furthermore, Mary Boyle succinctly notes the role that psychological discourses facilitate a representation of women as “weak and vulnerable” by “obscuring the potential links between the social construction of abortion and women’s experience of it.” (Boyle, 1997: 140)

The laws and regulations surrounding abortion and contraception remained unchanged for nearly eighty years in Canada.<sup>7</sup> The social climate manifested during the late 1960’s and 1970’s marked the rising of a new consciousness. Carol Smart succinctly describes this period of change as one that “signified a break with post-war austerity and puritanical morality.” (Smart, 1984: 54) She also notes this was a time of reform and the shifts in understanding certain societal roles were reflected in significant changes in family law. Second-wave feminism emerged from different social movements like the women’s liberation movement and the civil rights movement. Different forms of feminism also developed at this time (liberal feminism, black feminism, lesbian feminism, etc.) Feminist groups were engaged in raising a new consciousness regarding key issues that dealt with discrimination, activism, challenging traditional gender roles and patriarchal systems, and re-conceptualizing women’s issues (i.e. abortion, mothering, etc.) Key social and political figures emerged from these movements enabling an important shift in women’s consciousness in particular.

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<sup>7</sup>‘Chronology of Court Cases.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web March 6, 2005. <<http://cbctrust.com/homepage.html>> see section: Chronology of Court Cases. Abortion was entered into the Criminal Code in 1892. Abortion remained a criminal offence until 1969 in Canada, where debates and challenges to this law began to emerge.



For instance, American feminist theorists have and continue to influence feminist work in Canadian and Western culture in general. Numerous American feminist theorists like Susan Bordo, Sandra Bartky, and Catharine Mackinnon play an important role in our conceptualizations and understanding of the law, the roles of our social institutions and structures, gender and so forth. They have sparked some important feminist scholarship that has provided important resources for Canadian women. These influences even permeate our institutional practices. For example, different social processes including those of social groups shape Canadian legislative practices. In Canada, there are some organizations or groups that have been associated with legislative processes in regards to abortion. The Canadian Abortion Rights Action League (CARAL) was developed to support Dr. Henry Morgentaler's judicial proceedings in regards to his involvement with various court battles over restrictive abortion laws. This organization has been called upon by the Supreme Court of Canada to intervene in landmark cases involving access to safe, legal abortions in Canada.<sup>8</sup> In addition, feminist organizations have played essential roles in other important cases involving revisions to Canada's abortion laws, some include: the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (L.E.A.F.), Real Women of Canada and Canadian Physicians for Life.

In Canada, Dr. Henry Morgentaler became (and remains) a champion for the cause of women's unrestricted access to safe and legal abortions. He has been commonly

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<sup>8</sup>An 'intervenor' (or 'amicus') is a person, group or organization that is called upon to share their particular perspective on an issue involving a legal case (in cases where more than one 'intervenor' is consulted, they usually represent different views.) Different 'intervenor' have been associated with different court cases regarding abortion in Canada. For a list of intervenors in such cases, please see the Supreme Court of Canada website: <<http://www.lexum.umontreal.ca/csc-scc/cgi-bin/srch.pl?language=en&method=all&database=en%2Fjug&query=abortion+and+morgentaler&x=8&y=7>>

designated as the ‘father’ of abortion issues in Canada. Dr. Henry Morgentaler is “a leading advocate of accessible abortion services” in Canada. (Gagnon, 2003, p. 331) Dr. Morgentaler’s efforts have concentrated on substantial issues that surround abortion in Canada, such as, accessibility, legality, funding, safety and so forth. He is a leader in terms of raising pertinent issues relating to abortion in Canada but he is also recognized among the international community as a leader in his field.

Dr. Morgentaler has been a key figure in abortion debates in Canada because he demanded “repeal of the abortion law and freedom of choice on abortion” in 1967 and it sparked controversy and was the ultimate stimulus for the decriminalization of “contraception and some abortions” in 1969.<sup>9</sup> The 1970’s were marked by appeals to the 1969 Parliamentary decision to decriminalize certain abortions.<sup>10</sup> It was also a time when Dr. Morgentaler resumed his general practice of performing abortions in his private clinics as a way of challenging the restrictive abortion laws. The police repeatedly raided Dr. Morgentaler’s clinic (in Montreal, Quebec) and he was charged with numerous offences relating to performing illegal abortions. Dr. Morgentaler “serve[d] ten months in jail” and was subsequently acquitted by a jury in relation to other charges brought against him.<sup>11</sup> He continued to campaign against the restrictions imposed on women’s access to safe and legal abortions. It was not until 1988 that the abortion law, as noted in the criminal code, was ruled as “unconstitutional” according to the Supreme Court of Canada. The Supreme Court

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> The decriminalization of abortion included only those abortions performed by a medical doctor, in a hospital, and under specified conditions like if the mother’s life was endangered by the pregnancy or some other health risk. All other abortions, like those that Dr. Morgentaler performed in his private clinic, were still deemed illegal.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Chronology of Court Cases.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web March 6, 2005.  
<<http://cbctrust.com/homepage.html>> see section: Chronology of Court Cases.

struck down the laws on abortion from the criminal code and the federal government proceeded to outline, “a new gestationally based abortion law.”<sup>12</sup>

Numerous other court battles were fought over the right of access to legal abortions in each province of Canada. It was eventually decided through the courts that the federal government should regulate abortions. Furthermore, Dr. Morgentaler was acquitted of all charges incurred from the 1970’s to the 1990’s. To this day however, there are no explicit laws articulating the specific legality of abortion in Canada. The issue has been somewhat dormant and it remains largely an issue that the Canadian population appears to have accepted. With this said however, the issue continues to arise when there is a federal election or when “new” circumstances surround abortion, like those that involve ethical debates on new reproductive technologies or late-term abortions, showing that this remains a sensitive issue nonetheless. It is also very clear that abortion remains an important political issue.

The historical context of abortion in the United States is complex and eminently political. Legislation surrounding abortion has been largely guided by political principles and values. Abortions were legal in the United States until the mid-nineteenth century. It is only relatively recently, since the 1900’s, that abortions were prohibited in the law “unless two or more physicians agreed that the procedure was necessary to preserve the life of the pregnant women.”<sup>13</sup> This kind of ruling set a precedent for future legislative proceedings on abortion. Furthermore, it was not until 1973, in the landmark case of “Roe vs. Wade” that the Supreme Court of the United States “affirmed women’s legal right to choose abortion.”

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Chronology of Court Cases.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web March 6, 2005.  
<<http://cbctrust.com/homepage.html>> see section: Chronology of Court Cases.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Abortion in Law, History and Religion.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web March 25, 2005.  
<<http://www.cbctrust.com/homepage.html>> See section: Abortion in Law, History and Religion: United States: 43.

(Parrott and Condit, 1996: 19) This decision stimulated intense controversy and it has been contested on different levels since it came into ruling. For example, numerous amendments have been added including the “Hyde Amendment of 1977 weaken[ing] the assertion of women’s right to choose by allowing Congress to prohibit federal Medicaid funding for abortions.” (Parrott and Condit, 1996: 19) Like its geographical neighbor, the abortion debate in the United States has proven to remain a sensitive issue and one that is very much situated in the politics and moral pulse of the nation.

### Context of Post-Abortion

Post-abortion issues have been at the heart of numerous public debates surrounding the effects of abortion on women for numerous years now. They have even been the focus of political inquiries whereby research into post-abortion effects served to fuel and support specific political persuasions. For example, “at a briefing for Right-to-Life leaders, President Ronald Reagan asked Surgeon General C. Everett Koop to initiate a study on the medical and psychological consequences of legal abortion in the United States.” (Parrott and Condit, 1996: 17) Though President Reagan was undoubtedly aspiring to confirm, at some level, that abortions were psychologically damaging to women, his request for a report supporting his political views on the issue was unsuccessful. The Surgeon General was unable to find enough scientific evidence to support the claim that abortion caused important psychological and emotional sequelae in women.<sup>14</sup> (Parrott and Condit, 1996:18) This is just one example of how post-abortion issues have been politicized to serve very specific sides of the abortion debate.

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<sup>14</sup> Sequelae refers to responses and effects and in this context, it refers to the psychological and emotional responses and effects after an abortion.

The characteristics that are associated with post-abortion issues remain fervently controversial. The controversy lies mainly in the different theoretical and even ideological perspectives dealing with post-abortion issues. There are debates that question and challenge the more negative kind of characteristics identified with the experience of post-abortive women. Post-abortion issues typically range from the physical characteristics following an abortion procedure (i.e. aspects involving the care of the body after having an abortion procedure: post-operative bleeding, hormonal fluctuations and changes, etc.) to the psychological aspects involving mainly emotional reactions to the abortion. In most cases in the literature however, post-abortion issues are generally centered on the emotional aspects of the experience of having had an abortion and it is the aspect I concentrate on for this thesis. Furthermore, I define post-abortion discourses as that which *relates to the body of knowledge* '(truth') *that signifies what an experience of abortion constitutes*. Emotional sequelae have been problematized into the various debates of matters relating to abortion. In this thesis, I will begin by providing a description of the main objectives and arguments for each chapter.

In Chapter two, I provide a general overview of the main literature surrounding post-abortion issues. This literature focuses mainly on the emotional and psychological responses to having an abortion. The literature situates post-abortion issues within popular debates surrounding the validity of post-abortion stress syndrome (PASS.) There are numerous debates stemming from religious and medical groups alike. Some religious groups tend to assert the existence of PASS, sustaining their argument that abortions are essentially 'bad' for women. Another side of the debate involves medical experts from

various associations like the American Medical Association, or the American Psychological Association, refuse to recognize and incorporate PASS into their diagnostic manuals stating that PASS is simply a fabrication based on political and moral agendas and more importantly, they argue that there is simply a lack of evidence to support the claim to PASS.

An overview of the methodological approach I employ is provided in chapter three. I describe the methods I used to determine which materials to use to conduct my analysis. In addition, I provide a description of the process involved in choosing different websites as well as providing a rationale for choosing a particular book to include in my analysis.

Furthermore, in chapter four, I present my theoretical framework for the content of this thesis. I review the main theorists that I use to support and frame my arguments. One of the primary theorists that I use in this thesis is Michel Foucault. In particular, I use his conceptualization of discourse, power and knowledge to explicate the framework of post-abortion discourses. Michel Foucault's work helps to articulate the notion of discourse and the importance of power relations. In addition to Foucault's notions of discourse and power relations, I use Dorothy Smith's work to provide insights into feminist conceptualizations of power and textual relations (in terms of discourse.) Furthermore, I also use Dorothy Smith's work on subjectivity to explain the interactive processes involved between women and the texts I am analyzing. I also use Smith's work to incorporate and elaborate a feminist analysis of these particular post-abortion discourses. I incorporate certain aspects of Carol Gilligan's analysis of a major study conducted on

the decision to abort as part of my theoretical framework to demonstrate some of the functional characteristics of these discourses. Katharine Mackinnon's work is also used to support certain arguments relating to specific characteristics of post-abortion discourses (mostly relating to notions of femininity.)

I conduct an in-depth analysis of three Internet websites, and one book in chapter five. I elaborate and explicate the framework of post-abortion discourses by utilizing the different theorists outlined in chapter two. There, I describe in some detail, the four main themes I have identified as key constitutional elements of the discourses, as well as their characteristics. The themes I have identified are: identification of emotions, healing principles, resources, and narratives. I then use specific examples from the various websites and texts I have chosen to analyze to explicate the implications in regards to power, feminine subjectivity and 'truth.' I use personal narratives to communicate the sense of the issues that post-abortion discourses constitute and I also use these kinds of stories to elaborate on notions of construction of truth, power relations, subjectivity and freedom.

I conclude this thesis with a review of the main issues related to post-abortion discourses. I review the main themes and characteristics and relate them back to the social constructionist perspective that I situate my arguments in. I summarize the main elements that constitute the framework of post-abortion discourses as a tool to convey a certain message about abortion experiences. Finally, I suggest directions for future

research based on my findings and the cultural climate in which we presently find ourselves.



## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

Most women do not experience psychological problems or regret their abortion 2 years post-abortion, but some do. Those who do, tend to be women with a prior history of depression.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps one reason for the strong abortion/suicide link exists in the fact that in many ways abortion is like suicide. A person who threatens suicide is actually crying out for help. So are women who contemplate abortion. Both are in a state of despair. Both are lonely. Both feel faced by insurmountable odds.<sup>16</sup>

#### Introduction

The literature surrounding post-abortion issues is often conflicting. There is tremendous debate about the 'truth' behind an abortion experience. Some researchers Like Brenda Major, assert that abortions do not necessarily cause severe post-abortion distress and mental health sequelae whereas in contrast, researchers like David C. Reardon claim that abortions significantly increase the risk of depression and suicide. Nonetheless, the opposing sides of the debate show a trend whereby research on post-abortion issues is mainly concentrated on the emotional outcomes or responses of an abortion experience.

In this chapter, I explore the literature surrounding these types of issues. I discuss the principle elements that contribute to a specific contextualization of post-abortion issues relating mainly to emotional responses after an abortion. I discuss the main arguments

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<sup>15</sup>'Psychological Responses of Women After First-Trimester Abortion.' 2000. Accessed from the World Wide Web April 14, 2005. <<http://archpsyc.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/57/8/777?ijkey=d15081e9ed1a84df1287d098470997c30dd63beb#top>>

<sup>16</sup>'The Abortion/Suicide Connection.' 1993. Accessed from the World Wide Web April 10, 2005. <[http://www.abortionfacts.com/reardon/abortion\\_and\\_suicide.asp](http://www.abortionfacts.com/reardon/abortion_and_suicide.asp)>

surrounding this literature, that is, the controversial debates associated with post-abortion issues (i.e. post-abortion stress syndrome, the emphasis on negative emotional responses, links of abortion and suicide, etc.)

### Post-Abortion Literature

The literature surrounding post-abortion issues is rather extensive. With this said however, the majority of the literature focuses on the emotional aspect linked to having an abortion and this kind of literature is contextualized through the use of psychological and psychiatric rhetoric. It is important to note that the literature focuses on the emotional and psychological effects of abortion because the physiological effects have been extensively researched and the research community has largely accepted that legal abortions are benign to women's physical health.<sup>17</sup>

There are increasing debates surrounding the emotional and psychological sequelae associated with having procured an abortion. These debates argue, on the one side, that abortions cause severe or significant emotional trauma to women who experience them; and on the other side, that the research on emotional sequelae after an abortion is flawed, politically motivated and severely biased.

The debate surrounding post-abortion primarily encompasses issues like: the existence of post-abortion stress syndrome (PASS), and possible long-term effects of abortion on women's mental health and stability. There is a substantial amount of the literature

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<sup>17</sup> The term 'legal' abortion refers to abortions that are performed in a medical setting, under the supervision of a medical doctor.

dedicated to the debate surrounding ‘post-abortion stress syndrome’ (PASS.)<sup>18</sup> Even the actual name of this ‘disorder’ is at the forefront of skeptics’ criticisms for a lack of consensus regarding the name of this ‘disorder’ renders it at the very least, questionable. Hence, the debate lies mainly around the actual validity and recognition of such a disorder among the medical community. Some medical specialists argue that the disorder is fabricated, mainly, for political pretenses. The American Psychological Association denounces any medical recognition of PASS in its diagnostic manual, claiming there is simply a lack of scientific evidence to support it.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, many social groups, researchers, and including some medical experts, claim that PASS is ‘real’ and that it affects many women who have had abortions. Supporters of this claim argue that women can suffer from post-abortion trauma even many years after their abortion procedure.

The controversy over important psychological consequences after an abortion have persisted for at least twenty years now and it is a reflection of the partial divides that abortion issues aggravate. David C. Reardon is a leading researcher on post-abortion psychological sequelae. He has conducted numerous studies on this topic and has published his results in major scientific journals like the Journal of Canadian Medical Association. He conducted a highly controversial study involving the examination of psychiatric admissions after a group of women obtained an abortion. The major finding

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<sup>18</sup> Also termed post-abortion stress disorder (PASD.) In addition, PASS/PASD has been likened to post-traumatic-stress-syndrome, which is commonly diagnosed in people that have experienced some kind of trauma like rape, an accident, and also war veterans.

<sup>19</sup> Refers to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). This manual was developed as a diagnostic tool for physicians, psychologists and psychiatrists in light of relating specific symptoms to specific mental health illnesses. It is updated on a regular basis to account for the discovery of new illnesses and/or corrections to previous entries in the manual.

in his study revealed that, “Overall, women who had had an abortion had a significantly higher relative risk of psychiatric admission compared with women who had delivered for every time period examined.” (Reardon, 2003: 1253) In addition, his study revealed that women were more likely to experience post-abortion distress as time went by and as a result, were also more likely to be admitted for significant psychological or psychiatric health issues. There was also another study that provoked enormous controversy due to claims that induced abortions significantly increased the risk and occurrence of suicides. (Gissler et al. 1996: 1431-1434) This study was conducted in Finland and has been used to support arguments defending the notion that abortions are essentially harmful to women. In this regard, abortion has been contextualized as a risk factor and even a determinant of psychological and psychiatric health issues.

The debates surrounding the psychological responses after an abortion, like those found in Reardon’s research studies, have been largely contextualized within controversial issues surrounding methodological practices. There is continuous controversy and debate over the research methods aimed at identifying risk factors, indicators and determinants of psychological sequelae after an abortion. Critiques of such studies have brought to light the biased approaches of many studies around this topic. For example, Brenda Major is a strong leader in exposing the research biases of post-abortion distress issues. She has advocated for scientifically sound research studies on the effects of abortion on women. She has conducted different studies of her own on this topic where she has repeatedly found that women do not, in general, experience long-lasting psychological or psychiatric health issues after an abortion. Her study in 2000 examined the experiences

of 442 women who had obtained an abortion from February 1993 to September 1993 in Buffalo, New York. Her study consistently concluded that, “The rate of PTSD [post-traumatic-stress-syndrome] associated with abortion (1%) was substantially lower than the rate of PTSD in the general population of women in this age group (10.75%) and than the rate following traumas such as childhood physical abuse (48.5%) or rape (46%).”<sup>20</sup> She has also contended that the post-abortion distress symptoms that do arise in women are more likely to be indicative of other circumstances like a lack of social support, previous history of mental illness, etc. Major strongly objects to claims that depict abortion as a traumatic experience with long-term psychological risks.

The debates that Reardon and Major evoke are symbolic of the competing discourses around the abortion issue generally. Reardon situates women’s experiences in a discursive framework that emphasizes gendered characteristics like vulnerability, helplessness, and weaker emotional capabilities vis-à-vis ‘difficult’ or challenging life events. Reardon perpetuates a paternalistic view of women whereby his studies insinuate a need to ‘care’ for and ‘protect’ women. Moreover, it provides a knowledge basis for the discursive construction of the ‘trauma’ of abortion.

Major’s work on the other hand, allows for a more ‘empowered’ conceptualization of women. Major’s research on possible effects after abortion equally provides a space for the consideration of different social circumstances situates women’s experiences within the different social circumstances that surround them. Major’s studies provide the basis

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Psychological Responses of Women After First-Trimester Abortion.’ 2000. Accessed from the World Wide Web March 27, 2005. <<http://archpsyc.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/57/8/777?ijkey=d15081e9ed1a84df1287d098470997c30dd63beb#top>>

for a broader conceptualization and understanding of women's experiences in relation to abortion. She allows for a more comprehensive, less individualistic view of women's responses after having procured an abortion by taking into account the various external, social circumstances that may impact the way a woman responds to certain events in her life.

Reardon and Major are two leading opponents in relation to the post-abortion debate. They have written numerous articles, each motivated at times by the other's most recent criticism. Their work represents the current general concerns surrounding post-abortion issues in research and in practice. Their work also reflects the kind of gendered, stereotypical conceptualizations of women we propagate in our society. These discursive frameworks are linked to common conceptualizations of women whereby women are perceived to be associated with weaknesses and vulnerabilities that men arguably do not possess. These discursive elements are linked to common perceptions and idealizations of femininity and mothering.

### Motherhood and Femininity

Popular notions of motherhood and femininity are clearly exhibited through everyday social practices in our culture. Our Western culture has and continues to perpetuate a romanticized ideal of motherhood. Mothers are thought to possess inherent characteristics that designate them as nurturing, soft, caring, and thoughtful, etc. These characteristics have been attributed through a long history of social reinforcement through our institutionalization of the nuclear family as well as the social structures that

sustain such notions. Different feminist theorists have actually based their theories on in-depth analyses of femininity and motherhood. Selecting from a vast body of literature of feminist literature, I examine different feminist writers that have studied the construction of women in regards to notions of femininity and mothering.

Different feminist scholars have widely examined the role of femininity and motherhood in the construction of women's subjectivities. Numerous feminist theorists like Sara Ruddick have contributed to different conceptualizations and sociological analyses regarding femininity and motherhood. According to Ruddick, "<mother> designates a social category." (Ruddick, 1985: 97) Ruddick relates women's associations to 'mothering' to the kind of work women do. Ruddick notes that women's work generally entails caring and nurturing children, as well as maintaining a functional household in our culture. Women's social roles are embedded within gendered conceptualizations of what women should do and be like. She also notes that because "so many women are mothers or expect to become mothers, and because so many mothers are women, it is impossible to separate conceptually the maternal from the womanly." (Ruddick, 1985: 98) Through Ruddick's conceptualization of motherhood, she inextricably ties the notions of motherhood to women's subjectivities. This kind of theorizing about women's subjectivities has been fundamental in revealing a new way of thinking; where the kinds of factors influencing and shaping women's experiences and the way we understand and represent these experiences are shaped by different social factors.

Katharine Mackinnon positions the subjectivity of women as that which is a direct consequence or effect, of traditional gendered norms and values. She situates these norms and values within the institutional and structural order of our society therefore sustaining the qualities that serve the gendered biases upon which they have been grounded. Mackinnon examines a number of issues that relate to the strengths and weaknesses of feminism within the context of legal discourses. She examines issues like abortion, pornography, sexual assault and [in]equality using legal discourses to shed light on the gendered practices of our legal system but also of more general practices in our society. Furthermore, Mackinnon argues that sexual relations between men and women are related to the gendered approaches expressed and practiced in our society. The construction of sexual relations between men and women are based on gendered notions of femininity, which according to Mackinnon, are largely based on and defined by male norms, definitions, and values of what is considered to be feminine and masculine.

In many ways, the norms and values that qualify as 'feminine' are derived from the male values that are used to keep women in a subordinate category. Some of the more common characteristics associated with femininity include being soft, gentle, weak and even submissive in many ways. Mackinnon emphasizes women's position in society as clearly inferior and this remains so even despite the advent of the women's movement and different forms of feminism. Mackinnon elaborates her arguments by exploring women in legal discourses. She notes that women are not represented in legal discourses in a way that they themselves identify with at a basic level. For instance, Mackinnon notes that women, and the very notions of what *constitutes women*, are constructed by



male standards and values. These standards and values are played out in society in different ways. Mackinnon focuses on the ways in which law not only *perpetuates* these normative gender characteristics but also how they *constitute* law itself. For example, Mackinnon draws attention to sexual discrimination laws as an example of how laws perpetuate traditional gender roles. According to Mackinnon's analysis, the laws on sexual discrimination exploit the notions of equality as defined by male standards; that is, they view women through the 'eyes' of what men think women really are or ought to be. In Mackinnon's words, the law "measures our similarity with men to see if we are or can be men's equals." (Mackinnon, 1987: 71) The "equality rule" forms the foundation on which the laws of discrimination are grounded. From this point, Mackinnon notes that women are once again defined according to males standards and that these gendered notions of femininity serve to maintain a particular purpose, that is, to keep women in positions that are inferior to men (in need of men's protection, as vulnerable and essentially powerless.) (Mackinnon, 1987: 73) Mackinnon's arguments are useful in providing a contextual basis for situating our common conceptions of women's subjectivity and how they are enmeshed in the gender and power relations of our culture. In addition, these relations are clearly exhibited through our propagation of specific kinds of 'truth' in our society.

Notions of motherhood have also been theorized through various sociological perspectives. Feminist theories ground the traditional notions of motherhood in the continual perpetuation of a patriarchal values system in our cultural practices. In addition, some notions of motherhood have been influenced by religious undertones.

Conceptualizations of femininity have been defined and situated in alliance with notions of motherhood and what it ultimately means to be a complete, and fulfilled woman. They have been intertwined in a relationship that has fused the inherent qualities of each to shape women's subjectivity. Femininity has been equated with motherhood in which, "the female body has been defined as a maternal body, as a body that must have children." (Khaxas, 1997: 18-19) In addition, "[it] is also assumed that mother-love automatically comes with this body in the form of maternal instinct, and that the desire to be a mother motivates and lies at the heart of all females." (Khaxas, 1997: 18-19) As a result of this kind of conceptualization of the subjectivity of women, women are defined as one group possessing inherent characteristics. This kind of generalized attribution of qualities limits possibilities for conceptualizing women's subjectivities as diverse, complex, and multidimensional. Furthermore, there are also social judgments assigned to different feminine characteristics, further classifying women and restricting any kind of 'hope' for an autonomous, 'free' construction of her self. Any woman that strays from our cultural idealized notions of mothering and femininity is perceived as deviant and is even considered 'bad' at different levels. For example, women are not 'supposed' to be out-spoken, loud, assertive, and tough. These are not considered acceptable 'feminine' behaviors. In relation to mothering, women are taught to be 'good' mothers and that entails maintaining a functional, orderly household, caring and nurturing for children and ensuring that these remain her priority. Mothers that work outside the home are often criticized and portrayed as 'bad' mothers. As Paula M. Cooley articulates very clearly, "women are designated to be 'extraordinary' when it comes to mothering; being 'extraordinary' means that "a mother working in the public arena must accomplish

as a parent what she would have accomplished had she worked full time solely in the home.” (Cooley, 1999: 229) Furthermore, she asserts that women are continually criticized if they fail to meet the criteria of being a ‘good’ mother and women are, “liable to negative social responses ranging from blame for the breakdown of ‘the’ family to outright demonization.” (Cooley, 1999: 229) Considering that it is still today, mainly the mother that stays at home to take care of her child, she is placed at the forefront of being responsible for the successful outcome of her child’s healthy development as well as for the success of the family as a functional social unit. This responsabilization of the mother (and woman) reinforces the strict and ultimately limiting qualities of the gendered social order of our culture.

Furthermore, in our cultural practices, women have been socialized to embody specific feminine traits through their dress, stance, posture, speech and so forth. There are numerous industries that capitalize on reproducing and reinforcing distinct conceptions of femininity. For example, cosmetic companies, the media, and the fashion industry prosper through the reinforcement of certain values in regards to women’s ‘feminine subjectivities.’ Susan Bordo has written about the various ways that clothing, for example, has helped to define the subjectivities of women at different periods in time. For example, Bordo describes the functional purposes of specific clothing and dress practices in the nineteenth century. According to Bordo, the, “hourglass figure, emphasizing breasts and hips against a wasp waist, was an intelligible, symbolic form, representing a domestic, sexualized ideal of femininity.” (Bordo, 1993: 181) Bordo clearly demonstrated the social elements relating women and their subjectivities to the

dominant conceptualizations of what it meant, socially, to be a 'proper' woman. These kinds of practices served to restrict women to the spheres of the private and the domestic. Furthermore, different studies examining the role of media images in the construction of women's subjectivity have argued that "images [of women wearing restrictive clothing, faces decorated in make-up] serve only to reify the feminine body as a manageable and alterable site, one that is kept under control through a myriad of bodily disciplines that subjugate the feminine body, keeping it captive in its own habitual practices." (Burns-Ardolino, 2003)

In addition, notions of femininity and the characteristics that define what is feminine are articulated through women's every day lives and behaviors. Sandra Bartky has written about the various measures that women employ to ensure their feminine qualities. She describes women learning 'correct' feminine behaviors like learning to walk in a 'feminine' manner. According to Bartky, "The woman holds her arms closer to her body, palms against her sides; her walk is circumspect." (Bartky, 1988: 67) Bartky elaborates by noting the spatial elements related to notions of femininity whereby women are essentially taught to occupy less space than their male counterparts. Furthermore, she describes the kinds of social values attributed to different behaviors (what is considered feminine and un-feminine.)

The different arguments demonstrating the characteristics attributed to femininity and motherhood serve to illustrate the ways on which women are continually subjectified through the gendered practices of our society. These kinds of characteristics have been

normalized into women's subjectivities and I argue that they enable the perpetuation of specific kinds of social constructions of women's experiences. More specifically to this thesis, it is the experiences of women after having an abortion that is affected.

In addition to normalized conceptualizations of women's subjectivities, the literature surrounding post-abortion issues is largely centered on emotions. The emotional aspects related to the post-abortion experience are situated within psychological rhetoric and personal narratives. In the following section, I describe the main issues surrounding this aspect of the literature on post-abortion issues. I discuss the connection of emotions to women's experiences with abortion and how the representation of their emotions reflects a deeper meaning and function linked to women's subjectivities

### Sociology of Emotions

A strong tie to emotions and psychological rhetoric characterizes the literature surrounding responses after abortions. Research on responses to abortion is based on women's experiences at the individual level and there "is very little analysis of the social context in which unwanted pregnancy and abortion are experienced." (Boyle, 1997: 102) Personal narratives help contextualize and situate the experience of abortion in a specific way. There are different theories on the 'nature' of emotions in relation to abortion experiences. Some situate specific emotional responses in positivist or naturalistic theoretical perspectives. For example, some of the literature on abortion responses argues "that negative states following abortion have no cultural component, arguing instead that 'grief following a pregnancy loss is human, not necessarily a... religiously... induced... phenomenon.'" (Boyle: 1997: 102) In contrast, emotions are also theorized through a social constructionist perspective whereby

emotions are “functional in that they are constituted and prescribed in such a way as to sustain and endorse cultural systems of belief and value.” (Armon-Jones, 1988:57)

Emotions seem to impact the subjectivity of women in particular ways in the descriptive responses to abortion. I am arguing from the perspective that these ‘appropriate’ responses are learned and that their ‘appropriateness’ is socio-culturally determined. I do not believe that there is a ‘natural’ way to respond to abortion but rather, that the whole experience of abortion is constructed through and by the dominant norms and values of a particular social system. This theoretical perspective involves a social constructionist approach in that it views emotions as occupying a “socio-functional role.” (Armon-Jones, 1988:57) The purpose of this thesis however, is not to elaborate on the socio-functional roles of emotions but rather to demonstrate how the use of emotions contributes to building a particular kind of “discursive formation” in regards to post-abortion discourse. (Hall, 1997: 44)

In the numerous studies exploring emotional responses after an abortion, there is overwhelming emphasis on ‘negative’ emotions. Examples of ‘negative’ emotions are: guilt, shame, sadness, anger, regret, etc. Different researchers have argued that the post-abortion experience is severely biased and restricted through such a construction. For example, W.B. Miller examined, in depth, the different characteristic elements of post-abortion discourses. Miller argues that the discourses serve to perpetuate a negative perception of an abortion experience through subtle mechanisms exercised through discourses where they focus specifically and primarily on “neutral headings such as ‘psychological effects of abortion’ when their text is entirely about negative effects.”

(Boyle, 1997: 103) In this sense, Miller brings into evidence the prevalent biases that constitute a large part of these discourses.

It is clear at this point that the emotional aspect related to the post-abortion experience is an intricate part of the constitution of the discourses surrounding this topic and it is equally clear that the emotional element contributes to the social construction of the experience of abortion as one that is particularly difficult for women. There are numerous indications in the literature that point to the socio-functional roles of these kinds of discourses in relation to the use of emotions. Armon-Jones examines the social function(s) of emotions in the sense that, “the constructionist claims that such emotions do serve social functions because they involve culturally appropriate attitudes and are attached to cultural contexts.” (Armon-Jones, 1988: 57) Armon-Jones also provides a brief discussion on the juxtaposition of more ‘traditional’ arguments regarding the constitution of emotions and the social constructionist’s view of emotions. Emotions, according to Armon-Jones, are “socioculturally constituted.” (Armon-Jones, 1988: 68) This is the position that I argue from; I argue that the use of specific emotions in the discourses on post-abortion issues contributes to a social construction of the post-abortion experience.

In summary, it is clear in the literature surrounding post-abortion issues that common conceptualizations of femininity and motherhood are embedded in a specific framework that enables a particular kind of construction about post-abortion experiences. Different feminist theorists like Ruddick and Mackinnon have based the development of their

theories on conceptualizing notions of femininity and motherhood and relating them to the construction of women's subjectivities. The literature reveals that there is a clear discursive framework enveloping the kind of research on post-abortion issues. The literature denotes the controversial debates surrounding issues like PASS and long-term psychological sequelae following an abortion experience. The debates lie mainly with the notion that different studies claim that abortions have important, long-term psychological consequences on women's lives. There are numerous studies that refute these kinds of claims, denouncing them for being biased and empirically flawed. In addition to the controversial debates surrounding PASS, emotions are found to be an integral characteristic of the literature on post-abortion experiences. Emotions are used to explicate women's responses after having had an abortion and they are also used as a basis for situating post-abortion experiences as 'traumatic', and stressful life events. Women identify with certain emotions in their personal narratives. These narratives are used to explicate their experiences but also to frame the abortion experience in a specific way. The use of emotions in the literature on post-abortion issues serves to perpetuate specific conceptualizations of women and hence, their subjectivities.

The literature has led me to develop my key arguments relating to women's experiences with abortion. This kind of information has lead me to think about the ways in which the abortion experience is framed by power relations, notions of subjectivity, and their relationship to the construction of a particular kind of 'truth' or knowledge. The following chapter outlines in more detail, the implications of these aspects and their



relation to the social construction of women's subjectivities and their relationship with their post-abortion experiences.

## Chapter Three

### Methodological Approach

#### Introduction

Arriving at this chapter of my thesis posed numerous challenges for I was faced with choosing a methodology that would likely satisfy the more traditional requirements of sociological inquiry yet I yearned to strike a balance with my own, personal views on methodological approaches in research. I searched through numerous books, trying to find the perfect methodology for the questions I wanted to answer. In my search, I eventually came to the realization that my thesis could not constitute a ‘traditional’ sociological methodology but rather, that my research would require me to push beyond the boundaries of traditional methodologies and incorporate a more creative and ‘original’ approach. My initial exposure to the term ‘original’ research was through Shulamit Reinhartz’s, “Feminist Methods in Social Research.” Reinhartz makes it very clear that the term ‘original’ is relative to all the kinds of factors that influence ‘originality,’ including social factors, historical factors and so forth. Thus, Reinhartz acknowledges that, “[t]here probably is very little on earth that is entirely new.” (Reinhartz, 1992: 214) In this section of her book, Reinhartz describes a method that, “reflects the researcher’s effort to create a new approach that [meets] her feminist criteria.” (Reinhartz, 1992: 215)

With this said however, there *are* approaches to research that steer away from the more traditional scientific methods that have come to be normative in our culture. Feminism has always played a key role in exposing the biased elements of research in different

disciplines. The biased elements comprised of androcentric inclinations and prejudices, the exclusion of women altogether in the discourses and knowledge produced and so forth. For example, Smith argues that traditional sociology has been so patriarchal that women's voices and experiences have been almost entirely excluded from the processes involved in knowledge production. Different feminist theories called for a more inclusive (regarding women's participation and acknowledgment) approach to research methods. Feminist theories also brought to light a major issue dealing with the position of *researcher* and *researched*. Traditional scientific research boasts objectivity as one of the stronger qualities of the scientific method yet many feminists largely disagree. An example of a traditional scientific approach would involve collecting quantitative data for a survey of some kind. There would be strict rules highlighting objectivity meaning that the researcher has taken measures to ensure a 'professional' distance from the research subject (ensuring that personal experience and bias are minimized.) Feminists question the validity of strict objectivity in that, "what passes for 'objective' is actually the position of privileged white males." (Reinhartz, 1992: 261) Therefore, "value neutrality" is questionable because it often (though not exclusively) seems to be grounded on normative notions of what is considered to be neutral or objective. (Reinhartz, 1992: 261-262)

This brief discussion on traditional research methods and feminism brings me to my decision to consider an 'original' methodological approach for my analysis of post-abortion discourses. Post-abortion discourses are laden with value assumptions about gender and mothering, and in many ways, the post-abortion discourses I am analyzing are

constructed *from* such values. There are evident gendered notions of what women should feel, of what women want or should want. Therefore, in response to the type of discourses I am analyzing, I have chosen to explore a broader understanding of these discourses and use feminist theories as a platform from which I situate and inform my theoretical discussion and analysis. My methodological approach is informed by different feminist theories. I draw upon feminist theorists like: Dorothy Smith, Sandra Harding, Katherine Mackinnon and Carol Gilligan.

My methodological approach is reflective of the standpoint I am taking in my research. I argue from a social constructionist perspective whereby I inquire about the particular framework of post-abortion discourses. (Ward, 1996: 3) I investigate the kinds of social conditions that constitute these particular discourses. This demands a different approach that offers an analytical perspective and reflection of women's stories while developing some theoretical reflections about the ways these stories are constructed. I demonstrate how the discourses on post-abortion are centralized on women's experiences and that they (discourses *and* women) participate in the creation of 'new' knowledge but that they are also maintaining some of the normative values of 'old' knowledge.

Norman Fairclough provides a practical way of approaching discourse analysis. He employs Foucault's conceptualization of discourse as a basis for constructing a particular kind of approach to discourse analysis. According to Fairclough, Foucault views "the analysis of discourse... [as] the analysis of the domain of statements." (Fairclough, 2003: 123) I employ, in particular, Fairclough's general principle in regards to

approaching a textual analysis. Fairclough stresses “discourses are distinguished both by their ways of representing, and by their relationship to other social elements.”

Fairclough, 2003: 129) This approach is different from a more traditional content analysis whereby one would perhaps rely mainly on identifying and counting specific words, as well as noting their linguistic relevance and meanings (representing a quantitative orientation to research.) Instead, I use my principle research questions as a means to propel my initial examination of the post-abortion discourses, and then I proceed by identifying key themes and their characteristics. From there, I let my findings guide my research inquiries and development of key theoretical concepts. This approach concords well with a Foucauldian influenced conceptualization of discourse. Fairclough conceptualizes “discourse as (a) representing some particular part of the world, and (b) representing it from a particular perspective.” (Fairclough, 2003: 129) I use this kind of reasoning to elaborate on the main themes I identify within the discourses and relate them back to the theoretical framework involving power relations, subjectivity and ‘truth.’

### Method

When I first began thinking about writing my thesis on abortion, I found myself consumed by the enormity of the topic at hand. What was it about abortion that I wanted to study? What aspect of abortion could I shed light on? As I searched on the Internet for ideas, I realized that there was ample discussion surrounding the politics and ethics of abortion. I wanted to steer away from the existentialist, philosophical and even theological questions that the issue of abortion tends to arouse and I wanted to examine a

side of abortion that receives much less attention in terms of a deeper, more meaningful sociological analysis.

I came across numerous websites that addressed abortion but more specifically, the *experience* of abortion. I was quickly drawn to these sites as my mind raced with questions like, “What constitutes an abortion experience? How are ‘they’ describing and contextualizing abortion? Who is producing this material?” and so forth. These questions initially prompted my research into the subject of post-abortion issues. As I delved further into the information displayed on the websites I was observing, it became very important to me to research the sociological angle(s) of this issue. This became important to me because it was apparent that the sociological implications of this issue were, at best, being neglected, and at worst, they were being misguided by inadequate or severely biased psychological studies.

In addition to my searches on the Internet, I spoke to family, friends and other people I know that have experienced abortion (but also people that have not experienced abortion directly.) I asked them where they went or would go for information on post-abortion related issues such as grieving, counseling and so forth. The responses I received were varied but included searching the Internet, going back to the abortion provider they had previously gone to and consulting private psychologists. I did this mainly so I could have a general idea of where some people would go for this kind of information so I could use it as a starting ground for my own inquiries about the locality of this kind of information. Furthermore, I also consulted the yellow pages and a main community directory in

Montreal, to discover where abortions were mainly performed. The reason for this was again, to gain clearer insight into where some of the information about post-abortion might be located. Obtaining a complete list of abortion providers was very difficult due to the highly political, controversial, and negative perception of this medical procedure. Abortion providers continue to be threatened by radical anti-abortionist groups thus rendering it difficult to access to abortion clinics and other abortion providers (i.e. hospitals.) This kind of social context contributes to and sustains the 'taboo' quality associated with abortion in our culture.

#### The Internet as a Resource

I have chosen to concentrate the core of my analysis on various Internet websites because I consider this medium to be of increasing importance in regards to information. The Internet could be seen as a tool to research a topic like abortion because of the social stigmas generally associated with abortion in our culture. Due to the controversial factors associated with the topic at hand, people may not feel comfortable seeking out information in public arenas like libraries, bookstores, and so forth.

Technological advances, especially in regards to media technology, have greatly changed the way people access and use different forms of information. The Internet for example, is a source of information that has grown increasingly popular over recent years.

According to the most recent data gathered from the General Social Survey (cycle 14) conducted by Statistics Canada, Internet use has increased from 18% in 1998 to 53% in 2000. (Dryburgh, 2000: 2) This trend is reflective of increased accessibility to

computers and Internet services across Canada. Youths aged 15-19 years reported the most Internet use (90% of this age group used the Internet in the past year.) (Dryburgh, 2000: 2) In addition, with respect to young adults aged 20-29 years, 72% of them reported using the Internet. (Dryburgh, 2000: 2) Statistics Canada reports that Internet use decreases as age increases but nonetheless clearly indicates that the Internet is an important and relevant source of information in our culture today. According to CANSIM, the age groups that procure the most abortions are young adults with ages ranging from 15-29 years old.<sup>21</sup> (CANSIM, 2001) More specifically, according to CANSIM, young women in their twenties made up approximately 53% of the rates of abortion in 2001. With this in mind, it would not be unreasonable to assume at this point that women in their twenties, who have abortions, may also be likely to use the Internet - and they may be using the Internet to research health topics, including abortion.

It is important for me to note at this point that I completely acknowledge that rates for Internet use are relative to numerous social factors. For instance, computers and the technologies that surround the Internet are only accessible to privileged groups in society across the world. Some of these groups include the wealthy, those that are more educated (the measure of education is also relative to culture and other social factors), those that are professionals and so forth. In addition, research has indicated that the Internet is a gendered medium of communication.

Feminist scholars like Mei-Po Kwan examine the social conditions that contribute to the development of “new” technologies like the Internet. She notes that emerging

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<sup>21</sup> CANSIM is an online resource for socioeconomic statistics and is a division of Statistics Canada.



technologies do not necessarily ameliorate the quality of people's lives and in particular, women's lives. Kwan also notes that, "the design and development of new technologies tend to be shaped by existing relations between women and men." (Kwan, 2003: 372)

The conditions through which these technologies are developed are directed by the more traditional gender norms and values in our society. There is an evident gender gap in terms of accessibility of the Internet. Accessibility can refer to the more technical or physical aspects of the technologies, but it also refers to the design of the technologies whereby women have been and continue to be systematically excluded. This (social) exclusion is in large part an effect of male domination in the development and design of technology. Technologies like the Internet have been mainly designed *by* and *for* the purposes of business. There is no doubt that even today, the business field remains largely dominated by men and so the exclusion of women seems inherent to this process. It is quite clear that the Internet is a medium of information that is accessible only to those who reside in a privileged group. In contrast, women of many different backgrounds (ranging in economic status, culture, religious affiliation, etc.) seek abortions. This study is not intended to represent *all* women, nor is it to declare a kind of "truth" about the information that women seek, or access. It is a study that is exploring different mediums of information whereby textual information about post-abortion issues is mentioned. There are likely to be numerous interpretations of the discourses I am analyzing. My interpretation and analysis of the chosen texts seeks to identify certain key issues with relation to issues of power, 'truth', and notions of femininity or what constitutes being woman.

## Data

The major websites that I will focus my analysis on include: “Peace After Abortion,” the Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada (PPFC) and “Hope after Abortion.” With the exception of the latter, the websites that I have outlined above generally identify as groups that support a woman’s choice to abort and they tend to try to distance themselves from pro-life or more radical groups on this issue. They are generally connected to one another through their political and social position on the issue of abortion.

I include the “Hope After Abortion” website for comparative purposes in terms of its difference in orientation towards abortion as well as its incorporation and emphasis on religious/spiritual values. It is largely informed by and through an organization named, “The Elliot Institute.”<sup>22</sup> The institute associated with this particular website identifies as “pro-woman and pro-life.”<sup>23</sup> It is a resource that will be useful to examine because it offers a different perspective than the general ‘neutral’ or pro-choice oriented information I am analyzing in the other materials.

There are different reasons why I have chosen these sources of information for my analysis. To begin, I conducted a general search on the Internet using a major search engine called “Google.”<sup>24</sup> I began my search by entering such keywords as ‘post-abortion’ and ‘abortion healing.’ My searches revealed a number of common websites using both sets of keywords. Furthermore, considering the abundance in resources listed

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Elliott Institute: AfterAbortion.org.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web April 2, 2005. <<http://www.afterabortion.info>>

<sup>23</sup> ‘Elliott Institute: Our Mission and Ministry.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web April 6, 2005. <[http://www.afterabortion.org/Resources/Our\\_Mission\\_and\\_Ministry\\_Brochure.pdf](http://www.afterabortion.org/Resources/Our_Mission_and_Ministry_Brochure.pdf)>

<sup>24</sup> ‘Google.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web March 26, 2005. <[www.google.com](http://www.google.com)>

on the World Wide Web, I eventually had to decide which websites to analyze. This demanded a judgment call on my part. I noted the most common websites and the ones that appeared to be most popular (judged by the importance of the organization – governmental or cross-referenced as being a main information source for information on abortion related issues.)

I have included different kinds of sources in my analysis to be able to compare and contrast the kind of information and also to make evident the relevance of the political stance and identification of the discourse ‘producer’ on post-abortion issues. This allows me to take a better look at the kinds of values and social codes the different kinds of discourses produce and perpetuate.

In addition to the websites, I chose to analyze a book titled, “The Healing Choice,” by Candace De Puy and Dana Dovitch because I found it to be very informative in terms of lending insights to a specific kind of representation of an abortion experience. This book was chosen as a result of recommendations listed on the various websites (as well as other websites I have visited) that I was observing (i.e. “Peace After Abortion” and the “PPFC.”) It is a book that is regularly recommended as a relevant and credible source of information for women seeking help or a better understanding of their post-abortion experience.

Two psychotherapists wrote *The Healing Choice* and it reflects the extensive clinical experience they have in dealing with women who have had abortions throughout their lives. The book is largely influenced and shaped by psychological/psychiatric rhetoric

which is characteristic of post-abortion discourses. For example, the content of the book is clearly situated within the psychological and psychiatric rhetoric that are associated with post-abortion discourses in that they use terms such as “emotional recovery,” “self-examination,” and so forth. (De Puy & Dovitch, 1997)

## Chapter Four

### Theoretical Framework

It may be very clear to you which feeling you've been struggling with and why. Or you may feel confused because it sounds like several feelings are troubling you. However your post-abortion distress has manifested itself, understanding your feelings is the first step to healing.<sup>25</sup>

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I will outline the various theoretical concepts that I use to elaborate on my principle argument surrounding the discursive framing of abortion experiences. I use Michel Foucault's conceptualization of power (and discourse) for it offers a way of thinking about power in terms of relations. I also explore the ways in which notions of a feminine subjectivity have been constructed through Carol Gilligan's work on a study dealing with women's decision to abort. Another key concept relates to government. Once again, I use Foucault's work to elaborate on the notion of self-government. Within the discourses, there are different kinds of ways that individuals (women) act upon their selves in response to their post-abortion emotional reactions. 'Government' in this sense, focuses on the way individuals act upon their selves and this is demonstrated through post-abortion discourses whereby women engage in relations with the texts they are reading by identifying with certain feelings, and sharing personal narratives. It is equally important to note that government is embedded in relations of power, knowledge and subjectivity.

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<sup>25</sup>'Difficult Feelings.' Accessed from the World Wide Web March 26, 2005.  
<<http://www.peaceafterabortion.com/feelings.html>> See "Difficult Feelings" by Ava Torre-Bueno.

The next concept I present in this thesis is the concept of ‘truth.’ According to Foucault, ‘truth’ emerges from discursive frameworks that exercise power relations and thus build a particular form of knowledge. I expand on this conception of ‘truth’ as knowledge in terms of its relation to post-abortion discourses. I argue that post-abortion discourses need to be understood as a discursive process whereby women work up their own experiences through their identification with certain feelings and the sharing of personal narratives. Post-abortion discourses are constructed *by* and *through* the different elements that shape what an abortion experience is ‘supposed’ to represent

### Power

Traditional conceptualizations of power view “power as always radiating in a single direction – from top to bottom – and coming from a specific source – the sovereign, the state, the ruling class and so on.” (Hall, 1997: 49) In contrast to this formulation of power, I argue from a Foucauldian perspective whereby power is conceptualized as one that is exercised at the individual level and while it reaches and works *through* each individual, it also extends beyond the individual and is effected *by* and *through* everyone in society. Foucault describes this kind of power as “both an individualizing and a totalizing form of power.” (Foucault, 1982, p. 213) Furthermore, according to Foucault, knowledge and power are intertwined in a complex yet complimentary relationship. Foucault’s work formulated a ‘new’ form of power that constitutes knowledge as a vehicle for exercising power.

The concept of power has been much considered by social theorists and some have been in response to Michel Foucault’s innovative way of understanding and conceptualizing power. Different feminist theories have adopted Foucault’s conceptualization of power

in their work while others have been more critical. Among the different theorists critical of Foucault's application of power to feminist theories is Nancy Hartsock. She is critical of his notion of power citing that "poststructuralist theories such as those put forth by Michel Foucault fail to provide a theory of power for women." (Hartsock, 1990: 158) Hartsock notes the problem of Foucault's postmodern conception of power in that it does not take into account, nor questions, "differing material circumstances" like those present in the everyday lives and experiences of women. (Hartsock, 1990: 158) It is largely a universalized conception of power where power relations are the same for all people, ignoring any possibilities regarding differences among groups.

On the other hand, feminist theorist Carol Smart embraces Foucault's conceptualization of power as she employs it in her various analyses of the law and gender relations. According to Smart, medical and legal practices in our culture, play an important role in the way individuals govern their selves as well as the way groups are governed (i.e. women.)

According to other feminist theories, forms of power and knowledge are clearly situated in gender relations. Feminist theories have used different conceptualizations of power to demonstrate the gendered practices of our institutional and structural order. For example, Katharine Mackinnon constitutes power in the sexual relations between women and men. Sexuality, according to Mackinnon, is rooted in masculine norms and values. Men occupy positions of power in terms of sexual relations where they perpetuate the kind of patriarchal values that situate women as subordinate. According to Mackinnon, "Sexual

objectification is what defines women as sexual and as women under male supremacy.” (Mackinnon, 1987: 50) Mackinnon’s conceptualization of power is based on a form of power that is rooted in notions of dominance and is therefore contrary to Foucault’s notion of power. Furthermore, according to Mackinnon, power pervades our common knowledge and notions of truth and is thereby involved in an entangled relationship. With this said however, she conceives of power as gendered through mechanisms that support this kind of social construction of power. In this sense, this is what it most useful, from Mackinnon’s formulation of power, in relation to explicating the kinds of dynamics involved in post-abortion discourses. I argue that one cannot deny the existence of such gendered practices surrounding abortion issues for abortion is constructed from these kinds of mechanisms.

Likewise, according to Dorothy Smith, power can be occupied or possessed. For example, Smith asserts that, “positions of power are occupied by men.” (Smith 1987: 19) However, it is this particular aspect of her conceptualization that contradicts Foucault’s notion of power. Contrary to Smith’s argument I argue that women are active participants in the framing of abortion experiences and that their participation demonstrates the relational characteristics of power. The power element comes into play through *power relations*. For instance, these particular discourses would find it difficult to exist if women did not share their personal stories of abortion. Women’s direct (and indirect) participation in these particular discourses through the sharing of personal narratives, serves to perpetuate specific constructions of an abortion experience. In this regard, I argue that power is relational. According to Smith, women are excluded from



the process that renders their experiences into ‘truth,’ yet, they are nonetheless involved in a relation with the text, as well as with the ‘creators’ or organizations that manipulate the text to form the particular truth that fits with their perspective. In other words, in relation to the context of post-abortion discourses, women supply narratives that are then turned into the objects of the discourses, which, subsequently are used to support the particular argument of a particular kind of ‘truth.’

With this said however, I have found Smith’s argument regarding power and gender to be insightful and useful for understanding the specific power dynamics involved in post-abortion discourses. For example, though Smith views power as something that can be possessed, and more often than not, it is possessed by men, she provides a useful feminist conceptualization of power that takes into account the gendered aspects of power relations which is something that Foucault neglects in his theories. Smith’s work provides a space for conceptualizing about power, ‘truth’/knowledge and discourse from the standpoint of women’s everyday lives transcending the boundaries explicit in ‘normal’ everyday living. According to Smith, ‘normal’ everyday experiences are guided *by* and *through* the social practices that sustain men’s standpoint as universal where Smith notes that it is “in fact partial, limited, located in a particular position, and permeated by special interests and concerns.” (Smith, 1987: 20)

#### A ‘Feminine’ Subjectivity

These post-abortion discourses serve to perpetuate traditional gendered notions of feminine subjectivity. They do this by reinforcing what have been commonly identified

as feminine characteristics in our cultural practices. For example, the discourses address and largely focus on the emotional aspect of the post-abortion experience. In fact, *emotions* are the primary characteristics that constitute these discourses. Emotions have traditionally been associated with women and this association has served to position women as weaker, emotional beings as well as victims.

Carol Gilligan, whose most famous work was written in the late 1970's, conducted a study demonstrating women's moral development as being 'different,' but ultimately asserting that 'different' did not imply inferior. Her research pushes beyond the restrictive boundaries of the common social construction of women in our culture as being inherently different than men, as well as the characterization and qualification of these differences as inferior. She strongly resents the characterization of women's lived experiences as inferior to those of men. She seeks to acknowledge certain differences between these two genders notwithstanding her "reinterpretation of women's experience in terms of their own imagery of relationships... and also provid[ing] a nonhierarchical vision of human connection." (Gilligan, 1982: 62) In other words, Gilligan proposes a new way of thinking about gender differences and relations; a way that emphasizes the unique experiences observed by each gender, but also one that views these differences independent of hierarchical relational conceptions.

Gilligan focuses largely on identifying feminine subjective qualities via different research studies. She is perhaps most renowned for her analysis of a study called, "The Abortion Decision study" and it is this component of Gilligan's work that I emphasize in relation

to key concepts in this thesis (Gilligan, 1982:3). Gilligan relates her interpretation of women's experiences of moral issues and responsibility to abortion. She notes that there is an important distinction between how men and women construct the abortion dilemma. She situates the distinctions in what she calls an "ethic of care" in relation to the *self*. (Gilligan, 1982: 74) Gilligan uncovers the "feminine voice" in the examples she uses. (Gilligan, 1982: 79)

She notes that the various responses collected in the "Abortion Decision Study," express the generalized assumptions and conceptualizations of what it means to be a woman and all the characteristics that entails. Gilligan argues that this, in the end, had an impact on the way the women responded to the questions posed on abortion and the dilemmas abortion presented. Gilligan relates most of the participant responses to generalized/normalized notions about caring and about femininity. For example, Gilligan notes that common understandings of femininity are asserted through our identification with fulfilling our roles as women. She associates being pregnant with the greater sense and duty to care. According to Gilligan, pregnancy entails "the most concrete and physical way... to assume adult feminine roles" and that being "a mother in the societal as well as physical sense requires the assumption of parental responsibility for the care and protection of a child." (Gilligan, 1982: 76) Gilligan re-affirms and situates the female experience as one that is imbued with social relations involving the *self* and the 'other.'

According to Gilligan, in many ways, women validate their own subjectivity through relations with others. These relations are based on what she calls, an “ethic of care.” According to Gilligan, an “ethic of care” is actuated when “the conventional feminine voice emerges with great clarity, defining the self and proclaiming its worth on the basis of the ability to care for and protect others.” (Gilligan, 1982: 79) Gilligan reveals however, that the notions of caring have been shown to create a tension between what the women would *like* to do and what they feel they *should* do in terms of deciding to have an abortion or not. For example, Gilligan describes the onerous decision of having an abortion or not of one young woman. Part of the young woman’s testimony was documented as follows:

What I want to do is have the baby, but what I feel I should do, is have an abortion right now, because sometimes what you want isn’t right. Sometimes what is necessary comes before what you want, because it might not always lead to the right thing. (Gilligan, 1982, p.77)

This declaration illustrates a complex relationship between what the girl feels she wants, and what she believes is the right thing to do in the end. This tension is the center of what Gilligan describes as women “seeing moral dilemmas in terms of conflicting responsibilities.” (Gilligan, 1982:105) These tensions are also reflected in post-abortion discourses. One woman explains that she was conflicted with her decision to abort or not. She says, “I didn't tell a single soul. I knew what I "had" to do; what my mom would tell me to do. I was scared and I was confused.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>‘Prayers.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web March 19, 2005.  
<<http://www.hopeafterabortion.com/hope.cfm?sel=G84D>> see fourth message, 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph.

## Government and the Self

Some women feel bad about themselves because they don't feel guilty about having an abortion, but think they should feel guilty.

Just as each woman is unique, so is her personal path to healing. In general, understanding your emotional pain can help you to begin to let go of the grief, guilt, rage or shame you may be feeling. It is important to acknowledge that you are hurting and to take good care of yourself if you are experiencing difficulty.

You are not a bad person because you had an abortion.<sup>27</sup>

Research surrounding the notion of governmentality has evolved through recent years and it has contributed to a greater understanding of the mechanisms at play within the social order of our culture. Following Foucault, Nikolas Rose has been a key player in developing the notion of governmentality. Governmentality represents a way of thinking about the way(s) in which we are governed. It is a concept that evolved largely from Foucault's use of the term. In many ways, governmentality, in the postmodern theoretical context, reflects a different approach to understanding how people are governed whereby they are governed through mechanisms involving power relations, as opposed to a more 'top-down' perspective of government involving the ruling of one over another. Furthermore, according to Thomas Lemke, Foucault's notion of governmentality "offers a view on power beyond a perspective that centers either on consensus or on violence; it links technologies of the self with technologies of domination, the constitution of the subject to the formation of the state; and finally, it helps to differentiate between power and domination." (Lemke, 2002: 51)

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<sup>27</sup>'Emotional Responses After Abortion.' Accessed from the World Wide Web March 26, 2005. <<http://www.cbctrust.com/homepage.html>> See "Emotional Responses After Abortion."

The quote outlined at the beginning of this chapter, demonstrates the pervasive quality of how an abortion experience can affect women's understanding and perception of her self. A woman that has experienced an abortion measures her self against the norms and values practiced in her society. She may perceive her self to be a 'bad' person for choosing to terminate a pregnancy. Her sense of self hangs in the balance until she confronts her deed and learns to heal from it as well as to forgive her self for the decision she has taken. The point where she evaluates her actions through the moral suppositions of society and the techniques she applies to her self is the point where the abortion experience transpires into her subjectivity.

For Foucault, subjectivity is involved in complex relations with knowledge. In this case, knowledge or 'truth' is presented in a textual form and it is involved in a complex dynamic with the reader. Foucault extends his conceptualization of power to transcend modern theoretical conceptualizations of knowledge and subjectivity. According to Foucault, knowledge and subjectivity also flows *from* and *into* the broader notion of what is now termed *governmentality*. Foucault conceives "government" as a form of management whereby "the finality of government resides in the things it manages and in the pursuit of the perfection and intensification of the processes it directs; and the instruments of government, instead of being laws, now come to be a range of multiform tactics." (Foucault, 1991: 95) According to Foucault, governmentality refers to the processes involved in the institutional practices of our society exercising "this very specific albeit form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal from of

knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security.” (Foucault, 1991: 102)

In Foucault’s work on governmentality, he provides a brief historical glimpse into what he sees is the onset of a new conceptualization of government, one that, in many ways, transcends previous notions. Foucault discusses how a new vocabulary is developed, signifying a shift in thinking and practicing government. More ‘traditional’ notions of government involved a conceptualization of power: as power exerted over another (domination.) On the other hand, new conceptualizations of government drew links between power and subjectivity, drawing attention to the individual and his/her relationship with power. For Foucault, governmentality involves the weaving of an intricate relationship between power, knowledge and subjectivity. For Foucault, this change in government is marked at “the level of consciousness of each individual... [and refers to] the interest of the population regardless of what the interests and aspirations may be of the individuals who compose it, this is the new target and fundamental instrument of the government of population...” (Foucault, 1991, p. 100) Foucault uses “technologies of the self” to illustrate the mechanisms by which individuals are governing their selves. According to Foucault, technologies of the self represent that

which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Martin et al., 1988: 18)

Technologies of the self can be described as practices or mechanisms through which individuals act upon their selves. Individuals employ specific techniques to regulate their bodies and their conduct (behaviors.) Foucault notes that technologies of the self do not operate independently of other technologies but rather, that they are embedded in an intricate relation with technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, and technologies of power. (Foucault: 1988: 18) For this thesis however, I consider Foucault's technologies of the self to be most important in relation to women's post-abortion experiences.

Governmentality is an approach that refers to the very specific kind of government that is characteristic of Foucauldian-based theories. Nikolas Rose employs Foucault's conceptualizations of governmentality in the sense that Foucault describes a new kind of governance, one that is based *within* or *through* individuals. Rose elaborates this theory and adapts it to a contemporary, postmodern vision of the world we live in. Rose explicates a governmentality approach as one that transcends the divisions of public and private spheres in our society. There are explicit mechanisms that pervade individual notions of the self and it is through these mechanisms that governance is enabled. Furthermore, according to Rose, "Government thus depends upon the production, circulation, organization, and authorization of truths that incarnate what is to be governed, which make it thinkable, calculable, and practicable." (Rose, 1989: 6) In relation to post-abortion experiences and women's 'interaction' with the discourses that address these kinds of issues, they act upon their selves by identifying specific feelings associated with an abortion experience; through confessing their experiences; and then women further act upon their selves by seeking help and applying specific



techniques to transform and re-define their experiences. The discourses provide women with the mechanisms through which they can regulate their own conduct.

### Power and “Psy” Technologies

Nikolas Rose has also expanded on the concept of power by examining more closely the relationship between power and “psy” technologies. Rose examines the role(s) that psychological discourses play in constructing the way we come to understand our selves. Specifically, Rose is primarily concerned with the role that so-called “psy” technologies play in “the making of human being intelligible and practicable under a certain description.” (Rose, 1996, p. 2) Rose points to the increased focus on the self as a response to the destabilizing effects of post-modernist thought and a reaffirmation of modern philosophical thought where individualism and rationalism reign.

Rose uses Foucault’s notion of government as the “conduct of conduct” and uses, in particular, Foucault’s theoretical conception of the strategies of power and government as outlined in his “technologies.” (Rose, 1996, p. 29) Rose pays particular attention to “technologies of the self” which encompass “the ways in which individuals experience, understand, judge, and conduct themselves.” (Rose, 1996, p. 29)

Rose relies much on Foucault’s work to develop his own analysis of “psy” technologies. Disciplines like those of psychology and psychiatry emerge as forces of self-government through their proliferation in our media, our sciences, our popular culture and other aspects of our daily existence. Rose denotes the significant impact that “psy” technologies have on our subjectivity and self-government. According to Rose,

psychology “forces” us to examine our selves in profound ways thus impacting and re-defining the ways in which we “discover our self, be our self, love our self, and so forth.” (Rose, 1996, p. 4) This relates to Foucault’s notions of power where the “psy” discourses exercise power *through* our selves and hence shape the way we interact with our environment. In addition, one cannot overlook the role of experts in enabling “psy” technologies. For instance, experts play a role that reaches deep into the construction of the subject for these technologies help “shape and enhance the capacities of individuals.” (Nettleton, 1997, p. 212) I will argue that “psy” technologies and the experts that serve to promote self-knowledge acquire a more meaningful position than merely at the level of the individual. These facilitate the social structures around us that are fundamentally based on notions of self-governance.

In relation to post-abortion, some of the psychological discourse has had a major impact on the discursive framing of the abortion experience. As ‘experts,’ psychologists, and other ‘psy’ disciplines, evaluate the emotional status of women who have had abortions and ultimately determine, according to their “expertise,” a kind of typology for outlining what is considered to be a “normal” or “healthy” emotional response and an “abnormal” or “unhealthy” emotional response after having had an abortion procedure. According to the website of “Hope After Abortion,” there are numerous “psychological symptoms” associated with the post-abortion experience and if left untreated, they may manifest into more serious, long-term psychological and even psychiatric symptoms and diseases. I argue that the role of “experts” serves to perpetuate dominant values that reinforce stereotypical notions of femininity (being woman) and motherhood. In addition, these

discourses influence the shape of the self-help techniques such that the expert, even when not actually present or sought by the individual woman, shapes her self-construction through the self-help literature. The notion of recovery and healing implies there is something to recover from, that something has been wronged, or harmed. Psychology, according to Rose, is a discipline that has constructed, “a variety of new ways in which human beings have come to understand themselves and do things to themselves. (Rose, 1996: 2) According to Rose, psychology plays an important role in the way we have come to understand and act upon our *selves* in contemporary society.

Part of the ‘expert’s’ role within discourses is to establish a certain kind of ‘truth.’ In relation to abortion experiences, ‘experts’ help anchor specific ‘truths’ about what an abortion experience is ‘really’ like. Expertise knowledge is granted authority in our culture and it contributes to the perpetuation of a particular framing of an abortion experience as one that is traumatic and difficult for a woman.

### ‘Truth’

In many ways, our cultural understandings of ‘truth’ are derived from practices involving scientific investigation. The origins of scientific inquiry and method emanate from values drawn from modernity. Modernity challenged the religious doctrines governing the functions of the state and social order. Modernity can be theorized as an approach or way of thinking; it may also be conceived as “a social order that emerged following the Enlightenment.” (Lyon, 1999:25) Its beliefs are grounded in “progress and the power of human reason to produce freedom.” (Lyon, 1999: 25) The role of science (and scientific

method) has become a leading authority in the production of knowledge as we have come to understand and conceptualize it in our culture. Scientific inquiry rests on objective and rational epistemological ideals. The institutional and structural influences of modernity are ever present in our society despite numerous formal critiques surrounding basic assumptions and methodological biases.

Foucault's conception of 'truth' emerges from his theories on the power relations and discourses. According to Foucault, "it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together." (Foucault, 1978: 100) In this sense, Foucault alludes to the notion that discourses are involved in an intricate relationship with power and knowledge. These elements are part of what *constructs* different discourses but are also part of the *effects* of discourses. For example, Foucault points to the functional characteristics and role that discourses play where, "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but it also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it." (Foucault, 1978: 101) By this, Foucault emphasizes once again that discourses play an important role in different kinds of knowledge or 'truth' production. Here, Foucault employs a more postmodern way of thinking and theorizing about the role of discourses and 'truth' production. There is a kind of fluid or adaptable dynamic that encompasses the relations of power and 'truth' within discourses. Postmodernism not only refutes the kind of positivist biases associated with modern ways of thinking and theorizing about the world, but it also calls for a broadened conceptualization of knowledge and 'truth.'

Harding challenges the 'truth' regime of science, arguing that specific groups are systematically excluded from vital processes involved in the production of specific 'truths' in our culture and that there is a need to challenge this method of constructing knowledge. Her work opens the possibility of seeing another way of constructing knowledge, in particular, starting from the standpoint of women. While critics are valid to point out the essentializing of women in Harding's theories, what is particularly useful is her consideration to expand feminist theories and move away from the practices (even within current feminist research) that sustain the normative and exclusionary practices characteristic of more traditional scientific inquiry.

Harding stresses the axis at which this kind of research should start and affirms that in order "for a position to count as standpoint... we must insist on an objective location – women's lives – as the place from which feminist research should begin." (Harding, 1991: 123) Harding also affirms that it is not sufficient to enable women's voices but rather, that it is "the subsequently articulated observations of and theory about the rest of nature and social relations" that is crucial to the exercise of standpoint feminist theory. (Harding, 1991: 124) Furthermore, another important aspect that standpoint feminist theories demand is the recognition of "women's exclusion from the design and direction of both social order and the production of knowledge." (Harding, 1991: 124) The social order does not 'work' for women; it is designed for and functions for men. The element that grounds standpoint feminist theory lies in the examination of the relationships of knowledge and the "historical conditions" that help shape it. (Harding, 1991: 134) Harding, among others, contributes to the development of a different kind of theorizing

or thinking about the world we live in. In this manner, standpoint feminist theories offer a way of thinking about knowledge ('truth') that reflects the social conditions that helped shape it. It develops a more cognizant approach to the social elements that contribute to certain ways of constructing ideas, norms, values and 'truth.'

The above discussion of standpoint feminist theory leads me to a discussion of Dorothy Smith's contributions to this kind of feminist theory and how it applies to this thesis. Smith is considered to many to be the foremost voice in terms of feminist standpoint theory. To begin, Smith largely conceptualizes the core of standpoint feminist theory as emphasizing a certain reality or 'truth' regarding "differences between men and women's situations." (Harding, 1991: 120)

Smith's book titled: "Texts, Facts, and Femininity: Exploring the Relations of Ruling," explores the relations between a specific notion of the subject and text-based forms of knowledge. Smith elaborates on Foucault's conceptualization of discourse yet her work is situated in a different epistemological regime. According to Smith, discourses are situated within texts and are imbued in social relations; subjects are involved in an *active* relation with texts. The main difference between Foucault and Smith's conceptualization of discourse lies in Smith's conceptualization whereby discourse is "situated in and structure[s] social relations." (Smith, 1990:162) She reinforces her perspective by adding that, "texts enter into and order courses of action and relations among individuals." (Smith, 1990: 162) In other words, Smith views the discourses as having the ability (power) to act upon social relations. In contrast, Foucault construes discourses

as being an integral part of all things social; that 'we' all participate *in* and *with* discourses but that ultimately, the discourses *cannot* act *upon* us. Foucault's conceptualization of discourse and power does not permit this kind of interpretation of the role of discourses.

The texts, according to Smith, do not passively serve as a tool to illuminate the normative characteristics of society, but rather, they *produce* the normative organization of society, of genders, etc. (Smith, 1990: 176) In this sense, I argue that the post-abortion texts serve to perpetuate traditional gender norms; that the traditional 'codes' of our society and culture are exhibited through the content regarding the notion of emotionality within the discourses. In addition, Smith illustrates the interactive role and process exercised between the reader and the texts. The subject "presents herself as a text to be read using the doctrines of femininity as interpretive schemata." (Smith, 1990: 177) In this sense, the subject is also the object of the discourses. She objectifies her *self* by her very own subjectification. She does this by identifying as a woman who needs help in dealing with her post-abortion emotions, and by doing so, she objectifies her self by becoming the object that is to be analyzed and then transformed. The text that Smith refers to in the above mentioned quote, refers to the notion that a woman is already, *prima facie*, tied to a whole set of textually-based knowledge; a knowledge or 'truth' that classifies her in a very specific way. A woman is "to be 'read' and 'interpreted', not merely seen." (Smith, 1990: 176) Smith reinforces this latter statement by noting that a woman "presents herself as a text to be read using the doctrines of femininity as interpretive schemata." (Smith, 1990: 177) In other words, 'woman' is constantly being interpreted through the

normative values set forth by what our culture defines and associates as feminine; she is a participant in this relational process of 'performing' her identity in the way she has been taught to. This is similar to Judith Butler's notion of gender as performance. According to Butler, "gender is performance in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express." (Butler, 2001: 341) In addition, "acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions." (Butler, 2001: 341)

The key theoretical concepts outlined throughout this chapter are the tools that I use to explicate the discursive framework of post-abortion experiences. There are important implications in regards to these concepts and the shaping of a post-abortion discursive framework. The implications involve the intricate processes and relations between the subjectivity of women as individuals and as a group. The relational aspects between women and the texts demonstrates the significant role that each key concept plays in shaping the way post-abortion experiences are perceived, interpreted and lived.

Through the power relations exercised between women and their knowledge about post-abortion experiences (in the case of this thesis, through websites and texts), women formulate their experiences through personal narratives and these are intimately connected with relations of power and hence also extending to notions of governmentality.

Dorothy Smith's feminist work contributes to Foucault's conceptualization of power relations and governmentality in that she offers a space for thinking about these concepts



by reaching beyond the limits set forth by Foucault's theories. Smith acknowledges and brings to light the need to be more inclusive and aware of differences in relation to these concepts. According to Smith, In this sense, I have used Smith's feminist theories to compliment the aspects that are neglected in Foucault's theories where he does not allow space to account for difference (for example: difference in lived experiences and relations to knowledge between genders.)

The notion of governmentality permeates through the discursive framework of the post-abortion experience whereby women employ, according to Foucault's definition, "techniques of the self." Women act upon their selves in relation to their lived and perceived experiences of abortion and they do this by interacting at different levels with textual information.

Rose points out that there is a dynamic process involved in relating knowledge, the production of certain 'truths' and disciplines such as psychology. Psychology, and the experts behind the discipline, plays an important role in shaping specific 'truths' about the way we should act upon our selves in our unrelenting pursuit for an ultimate sense of happiness and being whole.

The interplay between these concepts is important to understand for they each impact the construction of the post-abortion experience and how it is represented in textual mediums as well as through the personal narratives of women who have lived these experiences.

## Chapter Five

### Analysis

Everything I read on abortion before I experienced it told me that 99.9 percent of women who have abortions do not suffer from depression or regret afterwards. In fact, the information told me I could expect to feel relieved. Where did they get all that from? I will never be the same again.<sup>28</sup>

#### Introduction

The social conditions leading to unwanted pregnancies vary greatly. For many women, various contraceptive measures have failed to prevent pregnancy during sexual intercourse. Other women are entangled in abusive relationships and the thought of having a child under those kinds of circumstances is unimaginable. Further still, some women exercise their right to choose abortion because they do not feel ready to have children or simply do not desire to have children. In the end, women's circumstances and decisions leading to an abortion are representative of their diverse lived realities.

I begin this chapter by introducing you, the reader, to a likely scenario inciting a woman to research the possible effects of having an abortion. The following is just one possible scenario among many different ones but lends insight into the different kinds of motivations for seeking out information on abortion and more specifically, the effects of abortion.

I begin this chapter by describing a story that illustrates one of the possible reasons for a woman to search the Internet for some information regarding the abortion experience.

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<sup>28</sup> 'Relief.' Accessed from the World Wide Web April 20, 2005.  
<<http://www.hopeafterabortion.com/hope.cfm?sel=C18L>>

There are different scenarios that may motivate a woman to seek out information about abortion and the experience of having an abortion. Some of these might include searching the Internet because a woman is not certain about her decision to abort and wants to gather information about other women who have experienced abortions themselves, she may be reluctant or 'shy' to seek out information through friends, family or organizations due to the stigma attached to abortion in our culture, etc. The Internet can be regarded as a 'safe' resource for it is accessible in a private manner.

Emily's Story:

*Emily is a young adult, at the start of her undergraduate degree. She eventually discovers her contraception failed and she becomes pregnant. This discovery initially troubles her as she struggles with her desire to attend and finish school as well as her desire to have a family at some point in her life (just not now.) She reflects deeply for several days and feels confident that the 'right' decision for her, at this point in her life, is to have an abortion. She is not ready to have children at this stage in her life.*

*However, different thoughts race through her mind. Should she tell her parents? What will her family think? What should she do? What if she regrets her decision? How will she feel after the abortion?*

*She desperately wants to discuss this with someone but feels the weight of public scrutiny. She is immediately shameful; she blames herself for failing to remember to take her 'pill' on time; she should have known better. Under the watchful eyes of public morality, she feels compelled to conduct her own research about abortion. Despite her initial*

*conviction that an abortion was the 'right' choice for her, she is nonetheless apprehensive about discussing her pregnancy with anyone, fearful that she may be influenced or even judged somehow. Completely aware of the stigmas attached to abortion, Emily decides to investigate on her own other women's responses after having an abortion. She simply wants to make sure she is making the 'right' decision despite what she feels is right for her.*

*One evening, Emily sits herself down in front of her computer and conducts different searches on the Internet. She conducts different 'google' searches on abortion where she is lead to information about abortion responses. She is curious to investigate what other women feel like after having chosen an abortion. She delves deeper into the literature on abortion responses and finds herself more confused and perplexed than she originally was. She is struck by the different kinds of information, seemingly situated in political and religious biases. She is deeply unsettled by the different personal narratives focusing on, what appears to be, a very difficult experience. Numerous messages catch her eyes: "Think hard before you let go." "It can form a hole in one's heart." "It is possible to heal." "You must forgive yourself." She is deeply perplexed at this point as it becomes clearer to her that this decision could impact the rest of her life, how she feels about herself and how she defines her self. She is rapidly engulfed by 'outside forces' constructing and re-constructing the abortion experience with every article and website she consults.*

The scenario described above reflects the kinds of issues that a woman faces when she is in the process of deciding to abort or not, and when she is seeking out information on abortion responses. Some of the issues women face when deciding to abort or not include the consideration that abortion remains taboo in our cultural practices, the stigma associated with abortion in general, and facing public scrutiny and moral judgment. The Internet is a comfortable avenue to access information because it is private. The woman accessing information through this medium can feel some sense of control for she is just one 'click' away if she encounters some disturbing information that she wishes not to see whereas with people, she can have more complex issues.

Keeping Emily's story in mind, I approach the following section with a detailed description of a book titled, *The Healing Choice*, and three websites: *Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada (PPFC)*, *Hope After Abortion* and *Peace After Abortion*. I provide a description of the website design, the tone, organization and content of information. Emily's search for information on abortion responses would likely guide her to similar sites. There are numerous common elements in terms of the organization and principle content of the websites and the book. I explore these further by elaborating on the main themes and characteristics of each website as well as the book.

In addition, I use examples from each source of information I have analyzed and I expand on key concepts relating to my arguments. I elaborate on common themes to develop my main argument that post-abortion discourses are framed by particular perceptions of

abortion as they are reflected in our cultural norms and values. The post-abortion discourses I analyze tend to problematize the experience of having had an abortion. Having had an abortion is an event in one's life that must be 'dealt' with. Foucault's conceptualizations of discourse, power and subjectivity as well as Smith's conceptualization of subjectivity are used to highlight the relations between the texts and the readers (subjects) and how this relational process strengthens the bond between each.

### Overview

As noted earlier, I have chosen to analyze three primary websites addressing post-abortion issues. These websites are: *Hope After Abortion*, *Peace After Abortion*, the *Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada* (PPFC.) Each website contains material related to information about post-abortion experiences or narratives, post-abortion healing, and a list of resources. There are common elements found throughout the websites. To begin, I will outline the common elements and I will then describe what constitutes each particular element as well as describing the particular thrust of each website. Furthermore, the websites I have chosen are specifically oriented to women who have experienced an abortion; it is clear that women are the subjects of these particular discourses.

Each website is generally organized into four main themes which I have identified as identification of emotions, healing principles, resources, and narratives. In addition to these four themes, I have identified five major characteristics that are common throughout *The Healing Choice*, *Hope After Abortion*, *Peace After Abortion*, and the

*PPFC*. The characteristics I have identified are: notion of self (includes and/or is interchangeable with the notion of self-esteem), emotions (i.e. guilt, shame, relief, sadness, etc.), forgiveness, spirituality or religion, and freedom (i.e. through healing.)

To begin, there is generally one section of the website that deals primarily with the process of identifying post-abortion distress; this is done by describing the various 'symptoms' associated with post-abortion distress. The 'symptoms' are generally defined as emotional reactions (i.e. sadness, guilt, anger, etc.) This aspect is usually discussed on the main pages of the websites. There is commonly a list of reported feelings or emotions associated with post-abortion experiences. The reader is asked to evaluate her own experience in relation to these emotions and/or 'symptoms.' In addition, there are numerous 'links' available for the reader to 'browse' through in search of clarification and expert analysis of related symptoms of post-abortion distress. The role of the expert is usually clearly defined at this point. There are also numerous references to psychologists/psychiatrists and in some cases, members of church like priests.

Secondly, the reader is generally guided through a number of healing principles. These healing principles can differ among websites as different perspectives that are dependant on particular ideological frameworks often guide them. Thirdly, there is an in-depth section on how to get help for post-abortion distress issues. There are numerous references and resources listed as recommendations for different kinds of assistance. For example, there are lists of books, other websites, counseling centers as well as detailed instructions for how to reach a professional counselor. Lastly, there is a section where

women's stories are shared. Personal narratives are posted directly on the website, but there are also links to message boards where women can 'interact' with other women who have similar experiences. Women are generally encouraged to share their stories. Disclosure is seen as a medium through which one can achieve personal peace and healing, as well as helping and enabling others to heal.

The following section will outline how each website depicts the four particular themes mentioned above and I will use the different characteristics to explicate their role in power relations, feminine subjectivity and 'truth.'

### Hope After Abortion

Since 1973, there have been more than 36 million abortions in the United States. While some women report relatively little trauma following abortion, for many, the experience is devastating, causing severe and long-lasting emotional, psychological and spiritual trauma.<sup>29</sup>

The "Hope After Abortion" website welcomes visitors by offering a message of hope in regards to the devastating effects of having had an abortion. The 'home page' of this particular website articulates in big, bold letters that, "there is hope after an abortion."<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, it asserts, "it is normal to grieve after an abortion."<sup>31</sup> The website portrays abortion as a difficult and traumatic experience but equally emphasizes that a woman can ultimately heal from this kind of experience by seeking help and guidance.

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<sup>29</sup>'Understanding Abortion's Aftermath.' Accessed from the World Wide Web March 31, 2005.

<<http://www.hopeafterabortion.com/hope.cfm?sel=A31Q>>

<sup>30</sup>'There is Hope After an Abortion.' Accessed from the World Wide Web March 31, 2005.

<<http://www.hopeafterabortion.com/index.cfm>>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



It is very important to note that this website is framed by a particularly strong religious undertone. It is important to note this characteristic because it helps shape the context and tone of the information posted on this website. There are numerous references to bible verses and prayers. The information posted on this website is grounded on Catholic religious values, paying particular attention to notions of life, hope, sin, confession and forgiveness. In fact, the website itself is largely based on the notion of hope for it's main purpose is to offer the 'proper' tools to heal from an abortion experience.

As the reader makes her way through the 'home' page of the website, she will notice that there are numerous guided search tabs on the right of the main web page. They direct the reader to specific information including: "Abortion's Aftermath, Where to Find Help, In their Own Words, etc."<sup>32</sup> Once the reader enters the first guided search field titled, "Abortion's Aftermath," the reader is provided with information on common responses after an abortion experience. The page includes the first theme I have identified, which involves a description of commonly identified emotional responses after having experienced an abortion. In the following paragraphs, I will describe the content of these guided search tabs through the four themes that I have identified. This will enable the reader to situate the context of the information provided more easily.

The first theme deals with the identification of emotions. Identifying emotions is a key component of the post-abortion discourses and the woman is encouraged to relate to specific feelings by reading the broad framework describing the abortion experience.

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<sup>32</sup>'There is Hope After an Abortion.' Accessed from the World Wide Web March 31, 2005.  
<<http://www.hopeafterabortion.com/index.cfm>>

The identification of emotions is facilitated through the comprehensive list of common emotional responses displayed on the 'introductory' website pages. The information found in 'Appendix A' illustrates the kinds of commonly identified emotional responses that experts in this field of knowledge have determined to be experienced by women after an abortion. In short, the list refers to common responses after an abortion; some examples are: low self-esteem, grief, depression, guilt, shame, etc. This list reinforces the framing of the abortion experience as a traumatic experience that requires healing.

There is a strong moral tone to the discourse presented on the website. For example, the main 'page' of the website introduces the reader (woman) to the inherent sin that abortion constitutes. In a section dedicated to the women who have had an abortion, the authors of the website reiterate the role and view of the Catholic Church in the healing of post-abortion trauma. They write:

“The Church is aware of the many factors which may have influenced your decision, and ... does not doubt that in many cases it was a painful and even shattering decision. The wound in your heart may not yet have healed. Certainly what happened was and remains terribly wrong. But do not give in to discouragement and do not lose hope. Try rather to understand what happened and face it honestly.”<sup>33</sup>

Emotional recovery from post-abortion trauma is depicted as a “journey.”<sup>34</sup> The journey that one leads is one that will bring fulfillment and ultimately, salvation from sins and all regretful experiences. They (website) offer the healing assistance of, “trained priests and professional counselors who can help you to heal spiritually and emotionally, no matter

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<sup>33</sup>‘There is Hope After an Abortion.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web March 21, 2005.  
<<http://www.hopeafterabortion.com/hope.cfm?sel=JHY7>>

<sup>34</sup>‘There is Hope After an Abortion.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web March 21, 2005.  
<<http://www.hopeafterabortion.com/hope.cfm?sel=JHY7>>

what faith tradition is yours.”<sup>35</sup> With this said however, the healing tools and techniques are informed by the Catholic Church’s specific perspective regarding the moral ‘rightness’ of abortion.

The second theme I have identified deals primarily with healing principles and these can be found in several sections throughout the *Hope After Abortion* website. The healing principles are not always explicit. They can be found mainly within the links related to religious teachings like prayers or specific scriptures. For example, one can ‘click’ on the section called: “Prayers” to locate the general orientation towards healing principles.<sup>36</sup>

Healing is described as possible once a woman has acknowledged and essentially confessed her sins. She will then achieve forgiveness and personal salvation.

In addition, the use of recognized experts is emphasized in terms of acknowledging and ascertaining the ‘true’ existence of specific emotional responses. For example, members of church and psychologists are directly identified as experts in this field and the website affirms that, “Evidence of post-abortion trauma is increasingly attested to by psychologists, counselors and those involved in post-abortion ministry.”<sup>37</sup> The use of experts serves to reinforce and validate the information displayed on the websites. It strengthens arguments surrounding the ‘truth’ behind an abortion experience.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Prayers.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web April 21, 2005.

<<http://www.hopeafterabortion.com/hope.cfm?sel=C18L>>

<sup>37</sup> ‘Understanding Abortion’s Aftermath.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web March 31, 2005.

<<http://www.hopeafterabortion.com/hope.cfm?sel=A31Q>>

There are different resources listed on the website and they are found by clicking on one of the guided search tabs. These resources are references to specific research articles and books dealing with post-abortion issues. Lastly, and most importantly in relation to this website, are the personal narratives. Narratives make up a significant part of the content of the website. There are numerous sections where narratives can be found on the website but the main ones are located in the section called: "In Their Own Words." The narratives consist of brief stories from women who have had abortions. Part of a woman's story is as follows:

I wasn't told that after having an abortion an unbelievable self-hatred would consume me and lead to distrust, suspicion, and the utter inability to care about myself, or others--including my four children. I wasn't told that hearing babies cry would trigger such anger that I wouldn't be able to be around babies at all.

I wasn't told that it would become impossible to look at my own eyes in a mirror. Or that my confidence would be so shaken that I would become unable to make important life decisions. My self-hatred kept me from pursuing my goal of becoming a registered nurse. I didn't think I deserved success.<sup>38</sup>

Narratives are used to support the principle argument presented on the *Hope After Abortion* website: that abortions are essentially 'bad' for women. For example, the website places a strong emphasis on the relation of personal narratives as a tool and guide for healing from an abortion experience. Hope After Abortion devotes a large amount of 'space' to different narratives depicting other women's stories of abortion. In many ways, the narratives help 'humanize' the experience of having an abortion (helps to give it life in terms of being able to relate to the experience on a more 'concrete' level.) If a woman is able to relate to a personal narrative that describes similar life circumstances leading up to a decision to abort, then the reader (woman) seeking advice or information

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<sup>38</sup> 'Stories.' Accessed from the World Wide Web April 21, 2005.  
<<http://www.hopeafterabortion.com/hope.cfm?sel=C18L>>

about what an abortion experience entails, will likely feel some sense of shared experience, or even a kind of bond.

Furthermore, it is equally important to note at this point that there is a strong emphasis on responses after an abortion throughout the *Hope after Abortion* website, and the information largely focuses on a particular way of framing the abortion experience. For instance, different sections of *Hope After Abortion* are dedicated to reinforcing information about an abortion experience as traumatic and life altering for women. If one enters the search tab titled: "After the Abortion," written by a social worker, one will encounter an essay describing the abortion experience in a way that reinforces the idea that abortions are ultimately 'bad.' The author of this essay, Paula Vandegaer, describes the experience a woman goes through when she decides to have an abortion and she essentially denies her female body the 'natural' experience of having a baby. She writes:

But if she wants to have an abortion she must try to stop this process. She must deny the maternal feelings entering into her consciousness. She must believe that what is inside of her is not fully a baby. She must stop the process of thinking about her baby as 'her baby.'

But although her mind may say one thing, her emotional life and her body cells say another. If she has the abortion, the very cells of her body remember the pregnancy and know that the process of change that had been going on was stopped in an unnatural manner. Her body and her emotions tell her that she is a mother who has lost a child. And so it is not surprising that after the abortion, a pain begins to emerge from the depths of her heart. She has a loss to mourn, but cannot allow herself to grieve. Grieving would require admitting to herself that a child was killed in the abortion and that she shares responsibility for her child's death. This is a very heavy burden to bear, and so, she resorts to denial in order to cope...<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> 'After the Abortion.' Accessed from the World Wide Web April 20, 2005.  
<<http://www.hopeafterabortion.com/hope.cfm?sel=A31Q>>

What Vandegaer indicates is a moral judgment about a woman's decision to have an abortion. Furthermore, Vandegaer insinuates a 'maternal' quality that would appear to be inherent in all women. Her comments reveal a profound bias and notion of 'truth' whereby abortions are essentially 'bad' and should be avoided in all circumstances. Vandegaer underlines the negative effects of having an abortion and the ways in which such an experience will ultimately affect a woman's life.

It is clear throughout the *Hope After Abortion* website, that the different characteristics that make up each theme, play an important role in shaping a particular discursive framework about an abortion experience. It is equally clear that the post-abortion experience is framed within a religious framework as well as one that sustains a view that abortions are not a viable option for women for they incur too many negative effects on women's lives.

Moreover, each theme serves to convey the messages from the website surrounding the effects of abortions on women. The main page deals with 'common' responses after an abortion and it serves to assist a woman in identifying her own feelings as she reads through this website. The healing principles are embedded within the various religious teachings consisting mainly of scriptures and prayers. Members of church are designated as experts in the field of post-abortion distress, as well as psychologists and other recognized professionals like social workers.

In the following section, I describe two other websites that reflect a different outlook than *Hope After Abortion*. The following websites are secular in nature yet offer some information about post-abortion healing in correspondence with the four general themes I have identified.

#### The Planned Parenthood Federation of Canada (PPFC)

Remind yourself why you made the decision to have an abortion. Remember you made the best decision you could, based on where you were in your life at the time.<sup>40</sup>

The PPFC is a leading organization “at the forefront of advocacy and service provision on a range of sexual health issues, from access to birth control, to adolescent pregnancy, to sexual violence. It is associated with the International Planned Parenthood Federation in efforts to educate and inform people regarding various issues surrounding sexual health. This organization is of particular interest and relevance to this thesis because it is a significant leader in producing and disseminating sexual health information across the country. It uses a government-funded program within the division of the Public Health Agency of Canada as a medium through which it disseminates its information. This medium is the “Canadian Health Network” (CHN); it is “a collection of web-based documents that provide Canadians with relevant health information” and it is funded by Health Canada. The PPFC provides information to the CHN and disseminates it via the websites of the CHN, directly from the PPFC website, as well as through pamphlets and other resource tools. Considering that it is government-funded, I felt it was important to include it in my analysis because it is a source that implies authority (in our culture) in

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<sup>40</sup>“How do women feel after an abortion?” Accessed from the World Wide Web April 2, 2005.  
<<http://www.ppfca.ca/ppfc/content.asp?articleid=259>>

terms of its relationship to knowledge production, and social cognizance. The PPFC claims that it abides by strict standards when researching, compiling and disseminating research results. The CHN maintains strict norms and “quality assurance” regarding the collection and dissemination of research results and some of these standards include: clearly stating authorship, gathering sources that are “professionally or legally accredited,” ensuring that “information is updated or reviewed on an adequate basis given the content,” etc.<sup>41</sup> It is likely to be a source of information that people in society trust because it has a certain social recognition.

The PPFC website is aesthetically appealing, drawing on the visual senses through its colorful web page design. The site displays pictures of ‘real’ people; that is, they show pictures of diverse groups of people demonstrating that they have a certain level of awareness and sensitivity to the issues surrounding diversity and representation. The site is well organized whereby convenient tabs are highlighted to promote major topics and to facilitate access to information in a faster, more efficient manner. This particular website is extensive because it provides different information about a variety of topics related to sexual health issues. It is not a specialized resource on abortion or post-abortion thus distinguishing it from the others included in my analysis.

The PPFC website’s section on post-abortion issues contains similar content to the Peace After Abortion and Hope After Abortion websites in terms of its framing of the abortion experience as one that comprises of particular emotional reactions after having had an

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<sup>41</sup>‘Quality Assurance.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web March 24, 2005. <<http://www.canadian-health-network.ca/servlet/ContentServer?cid=1042668269524&pagename=CHN-RCS%2FPage%2FShellCHNResourcePageTemplate&c=Page&lang=En>> See Quality Assurance section.



abortion. I included in this thesis. The information about abortion and post-abortion issues is located in the “sexual health” section of the site. Once the reader has made her way to this section, she must direct herself, using the tabs from the guided search, to the following section titled: “Pregnancy and Options.”<sup>42</sup> Once the reader arrives at this section of the website, she has different options to choose from to retrieve different kinds of information. The subtitles cover a range of issues related to pregnancy and reproduction like: adoption, creating a birth plan, post-partum contraception, etc. The particular sub-section I am concerned with for this analysis is the section titled: “How do women feel after an abortion?”<sup>43</sup>

This sub-section is a general, one-page resource for women who have experienced an abortion and are seeking information on abortion responses but it is also a resource for women who have not necessarily had an abortion but who are getting informed about possible responses. This site is organized in a similar way as the other websites whereby it contains the four themes and their various characteristics.

The first aspect deals with the identification of certain feelings associated with an abortion experience. It is typically characterized by specific descriptions of what are considered ‘normal’ emotional responses to an abortion experience. The authors state that, “It is normal for a woman to experience a range of emotions after an abortion, such

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<sup>42</sup>‘Pregnancy and Options.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web March 24, 2005.

<<http://www.ppfca.ca/ppfc/content.asp?articleid=69>>

<sup>43</sup>‘How do women feel after an abortion?’ Accessed from the World Wide Web April 2, 2005.

<<http://www.ppfca.ca/ppfc/content.asp?articleid=259>>

as relief, sadness, happiness, and feelings of loss.”<sup>44</sup> The main page concentrates on describing common responses as well as elaborating on the kinds of factors that may contribute to certain emotional responses. The information posted on this section of the website helps the reader identify with and relate to what are considered ‘normal’ feelings as well as the kinds of feelings that could lead to more serious or problematic mental health issues. For example, the website situates the experience of having chosen an abortion as “a difficult life decision” where it is considered “natural to have second thoughts.”<sup>45</sup> The website participates in the framing of the abortion experience in a very specific way. Women are encouraged to identify their feelings in regards to their abortion experience and are directed to identify those feelings within a particular set of standardized responses.

The other main aspect of this particular website is the focus on healing which corresponds with the second theme I identify as principle elements of these particular websites. The latter part of the website outlines key suggestions to assist the woman in her journey to recovery from an abortion experience. The PPFC addresses the reader directly at this point, noting that, “there are concrete things you can do to help come to terms with what has happened.”<sup>46</sup> This particular section is dedicated to resolving feelings and healing. Lastly, the site provides a detailed list of external resources that women may seek further help in dealing with their post-abortion feelings. This list includes a list of websites, books, and self-help guides.

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<sup>44</sup>“How do women feel after an abortion?” Accessed from the World Wide Web April 2, 2005. <<http://www.pffc.ca/ppfc/content.asp?articleid=259>>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

The organization of the content and the characteristics of this website are comparable to the Hope After Abortion and Peace After Abortion websites<sup>47</sup> The PPFC website serves as an important sexual health resource for different people and community health organizations across Canada. Its association with the CHN renders it a valuable and leading source of information. The PPFC recognizes the possibility of women experiencing more positive responses to abortion but nonetheless, the focus remains on the more negative responses after an abortion like sadness, grief, anger, etc. The emotional responses described on this website are characterized as ‘normal’ responses to abortion. This serves to normalize an abortion experience and serves to perpetuate a specific framing of an abortion experience. The framing of an abortion experience, in this sense, focuses on the questions, doubts and negative responses associated with having had an abortion. Lastly, the focus on healing leads to assumptions about an abortion experience as being one that is traumatic, life altering in a woman’s life.

The following section deals with the Peace After Abortion website. Focusing on personal narratives as well as feelings associated with experiencing abortion, this website is another example demonstrating a very specific discursive framing of an abortion experience.

### Peace After Abortion

This particular website is very simple in terms of website design. It contains mostly text and it is created and maintained by a recognized author on post-abortion healing, Ava Torre-Bueno. Her book, “Peace After Abortion,” is recommended on various websites,

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<sup>47</sup> I discuss my findings from the Peace After Abortion website in the following section.

and through different organizations, as a resource guide for post-abortion healing. For example, the PPFC recommends this book and author as a resource for women who are seeking help to recover from their post-abortion experience.

Torre-Bueno's website is organized in a similar fashion to the *PPFC* and *Hope After Abortion* websites. The material presented on the website demonstrates the author as fully engaged in an open dialogue with the reader. The author 'talks' directly to the reader; the content is written in a very informal, accessible way. The author establishes a relationship with the reader by addressing her and her needs directly and 'speaking' in a friendly tone. For example, Torre-Bueno 'speaks' directly to the reader by welcoming her to this website; "If you found your way to this page, chances are you're a woman who is hurting in some way after an abortion... You will find information here to help you understand the origin of your emotional and spiritual pain"<sup>48</sup> There are very little graphics on this website. The welcome page has a picture of the author's book, of which this website, and its content, is inspired by. The picture of the book has a cover page with trees, a full moon, and it is set in a misty blue background color, which reminds me of the peaceful characteristics of an early dawn or very late evening. It inspires a sense of serenity and calmness and this is the general feeling I experience when I visit this website. The material is organized in a way that leaves the reader feeling welcomed and certainly not threatened. This is important to note because many other websites are more 'aggressive' in their presentation and stimulate very different feelings.

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<sup>48</sup>'Peace After Abortion.' Accessed from the World Wide Web April 2, 2005.  
<<http://www.peaceafterabortion.com/>>

The author follows the general organizational elements I identify as being characteristic of these kinds of websites. For instance, the main page outlines the key issues related to post-abortion distress. They are indicated with guided search tabs on the left hand side of the web page. The reader has the option of 'clicking' on the issue she wants to further explore. The reader equally has the opportunity to 'click' on highlighted words within the text. Also embedded within the text in all the different sections of the website is an opportunity for the reader to 'click' on names of people who share personal narratives, so depending on what the specific topic is, there is generally a story that accompanies it and helps to humanize the experience.

The first tab deals with the identification of feelings or emotions in relation to the woman's abortion experience. There is a comprehensive list of emotions linked with the abortion experience and they are generally contextualized within the scope of feelings linked with some kind of uneasiness or distress. There is a description of depression and the various indications of depression, followed by a list of emotions like guilt, anger, shame and so forth. The personal narratives are used as tools to illuminate and 'give life' to the kinds of emotions discussed on the website.

The second and third guided search tabs deal with "pregnancy" and other "related life events."<sup>49</sup> These sections are designed to assist the woman in identifying the causes leading up to an unwanted pregnancy as well linking other life events to current feelings of distress about the abortion experience. The section on pregnancy specifically outlines

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<sup>49</sup>'Why did I get pregnant when I did?' Accessed from the World Wide Web April 2, 2005.  
<<http://www.peaceafterabortion.com/pregnancy.html>>

various possible causes, defined by the following headlines: “knowledge about anatomy, physiology, birth control; boyfriend pressure; life transitions: beginning sexuality; life transitions: in relationships; life transitions: after pregnancies,” and so forth.<sup>50</sup> The third tab deals with “related life events” and this is mainly oriented towards recognizing the role(s) that previous experiences play in current feelings about an abortion experience. Torre-Bueno draws a connection between a woman’s past lived experiences and the present emotions she may be feeling in regards to her abortion. Torre-Bueno describes these past experiences as “old losses” and “psychological injuries.”<sup>51</sup> She grounds past lived experiences in psychological rhetoric noting the importance of exploring these “suppressed” emotions and urging the woman to “revisit[ed] [these past experiences] to resolve the emotions they have awakened.”<sup>52</sup> These sections of the website clearly correspond with the themes I have identified as they consist of elements of healing principles.

There is a guided search tab that deals with personal narratives. There are five personal narratives displayed on the website. The narratives are differentiated by name: Althea, June, Manuela, Rebecca and Leah. Each narrative tells parts of the story of a young woman and the issues related to her abortion experience. The different women describe their experiences with abortion but in respect to their particular feelings of distress, like depression, anger, sadness, and so on.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Related Life Events.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web April 2, 2005.

<[http://www.peaceafterabortion.com/life\\_events.html](http://www.peaceafterabortion.com/life_events.html)>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

There is a specific section on this website that addresses men and their feelings in relation to a partner, friend, or family member's abortion. I acknowledge this particular section yet do not go into a descriptive analysis of the content of this section because it is oriented towards the experiences of men as the subject, and I am concerned with women as subject.

Lastly, it is important to note that the author provides a list of resources (including her own book) for post-abortion distress concerns. The resources are organized and contextualized to serve the purpose of healing from post-abortion distress.

In my analysis above, I have explicated the main aspects that constitute the *Peace After Abortion* website. The concentration of emotional responses and personal narratives posted on this website serve to situate an abortion experience within a particular discursive framework; one that emphasizes the difficulty of an abortion experience as characterized through emotional responses like grief, anger, regret, depression, etc. Peace After Abortion is a resource directed at guiding women towards healing from their experience(s) with abortion and by emphasizing the notion of healing; this resource also serves to sustain notions of abortion as essentially 'bad' for women.

As we will see in the following section, the websites presented above mirror the themes found in the book titled, "*The Healing Choice*." The themes (identification of emotions, healing principles, resources, and narratives) are found throughout the book and serve to sustain a particular discursive framework about an abortion experience.

## The Healing Choice

“Abortion is not a frivolous choice. No woman sets out to create, then terminate, a possible life...” – De Puy and Dovitch

*The Healing Choice* is a book written by two professional psychotherapists from the United States. They have written this book as a self-help guide to emotional healing and recovery after an abortion. It is written like many other self-help guides whereby it describes specific issues that a person (in this case, a woman) is likely to identify with after having had an abortion, and then the authors (experts) provide a set of guidelines to overcome the barriers imposed by these issues. The book is clearly situated within psychotherapeutic and medical discourses. For example, the authors' language and use of psychological or medical terminology throughout the book highlight a clear bias for this kind of expertise.

*The Healing Choice* is divided into three main sections: “The Experience, The Aftermath, and Acceptance.” (De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 9-12) Within each section, there are numerous chapters that are separated by themes or key issues identified. The first section deals with the main events leading up to the abortion experience: events leading to an unplanned/unwanted pregnancy, events leading to a decision to abort. The second section deals mainly with key emotions tied to a post-abortion experience. Lastly, the third section brings together all the elements described throughout the book and provides guidelines to healing the wounds from an abortion experience.



The following paragraphs will demonstrate the way the main themes are organized throughout the book to sustain a discursive framework about an experience of abortion as an event that is difficult and even traumatic in a woman's life.

The authors introduce the topic of post-abortion issues by highlighting the issue of **choice** in regards to an abortion. The issue of choice is emphasized in a way that responsabilizes the woman that *made* the decision. Emphasis is placed on the difficulty of deciding to abort or not. From the onset, the experience of having had an abortion is contextualized as being a difficult, important and life altering decision in a woman's life. This sets the stage for the material addressed throughout the book.

The beginning of the book discusses the various mixed feelings associated with having had an abortion and that "these feelings can arise over time – sometimes years later – as women reflect back upon their experience." (De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 14) The authors clearly set abortion as a difficult experience that a woman would likely not choose to go through under "normal" circumstances. These "normal" circumstances are that a woman would ordinarily want to have a child and would ordinarily be happy about a pregnancy.

The authors point out that post-abortion distress issues are particular because they reflect the consequences of a woman's choice or decision.<sup>53</sup> They (authors) tie this notion in with the *choice* to decide to 'heal' from the abortion experience thus further

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<sup>53</sup> Post-abortion distress issues refer to the negative or uneasy emotional reactions after having had an abortion. Some of these emotions are: sadness, grief, anger, guilt, regret, etc. They are indicators of some kind of distress or discomfort with an abortion experience.

responsibilizing the subject (woman). The idea that there is a need for post-abortion healing and recovery indicates that there is, something to recover from and I argue that by contextualizing an abortion experience in this way, the authors perpetuate the more common conceptualization of abortion as a negative and emotionally damaging experience.

The authors explain that they thought of writing this book as a result of numerous interviews with female clients who had experienced abortions. They describe the need to write this book as emerging from their concern “to find out how few had discussed the life changing decision they had made.” (De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 15) The authors reveal that the majority of the women they interviewed expressed deep emotions in regards to their experience of abortion and that this occurred despite a lapse of time since procuring the abortion(s).

The purpose and content of the book is based on “forty women who had experienced one or more abortions.” (De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 15) The purpose of the book is very clear; it is to help women heal the emotional wounds from their post-abortion experiences. For example, the authors engage in an open dialogue with the reader and suggest to the reader to identify key emotions or feelings about their abortion experience. The reader is then asked to further examine those emotions by investigating the source and context of particular feelings. Once this is done, the authors provide guidelines to begin the healing process, the process of self-transformation, thus ultimately leading to freedom from inauspicious emotions.

As noted above, the first chapter of the book deals with the experiences leading up to the decision to abort. The authors begin by describing the different kinds of feelings surrounding the pregnancy leading to abortion. They describe a multitude of conflicting feelings experienced by the women they interviewed for their research. De Puy and Dovitch describe their surprise at the responses they received from women who had abortions, including some who had an abortion numerous years before their interview with them. They asked all the women they interviewed to recount the emotions they felt and are feeling in regards to the pregnancy they experienced, followed by the emotions associated with their abortions. The personal accounts from the women prompted the authors to write this book as they concluded, from their research, that women who had abortions lacked the kind of psychotherapeutic guidance and expertise that would help them deal with unresolved emotional scars from abortions they had procured throughout their lifetime.

Similar to the three websites I described in the previous sections (*Hope After Abortion*, *PPFC and Peace After Abortion*), *The Healing Choice* clearly depicts the characteristics that enable a specific construction of an abortion experience as one that is difficult for *any* woman. De Puy and Dovitch ground their main objective (healing) on the notion that abortions are difficult and the women who experience abortion need special help or assistance in dealing with their emotional responses to this 'traumatic' event in their lives. De Puy and Dovitch rely on personal narratives to stress the need for an extensive examination of the self after one has had an abortion. They emphasize that emotional reactions may appear at any point after an abortion, even years later thus rendering a

close inspection of one's self and feelings an ongoing, necessary and vital part of 'recovery.'

The next sections bring together the main points drawn out from each source I have analyzed (*Hope After Abortion*, *PPFC*, *Peace After Abortion*, and *The Healing Choice*) and contextualizes the discursive framework of post-abortion discourses within broader concepts involving notions of subjectivity, motherhood, femininity, emotions, confession, power, and 'truth.' I demonstrate how each of these broad notions relate to each other and how each demonstrates the discursive framework that these particular discourses embody. Moreover, I demonstrate how the discursive framework works to constitute a particular 'truth' or knowledge about the abortion experience. The themes I have identified throughout the description of the four sources I have included in my analysis (identification of emotions, healing principles, resources and personal narratives) are the elements that encompass the discursive framework of an abortion experience as an experience that is to be healed, nurtured, and cared for. Abortion in this sense is characteristically a 'bad' experience and evokes negative emotional responses like sadness, regret, grief and so forth. A closer examination of the broad themes outlined above will allow for an even closer look at how the abortion experience is being framed, and more importantly what factors play a role in sustaining such a construction. Moreover, the following section demonstrates how these elements and factors come together to enable the discourses to function as specific forms of knowledge or 'truth.'

## The Subject

“If you haven’t looked at your feelings about your abortion, there are probably a lot of other things you haven’t looked at too.” - Deneen  
(De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 205)

To begin, I identify the subject of the discourses. It is important to identify this subject because it varies according to the intent and purpose of the discourses. In other words, there are different subjects associated with different post-abortion discourses. For example, some focus their attention to the male partners of the women that have had abortions, thus, these men are the subjects of these particular discourses. On the main website of “Peace After Abortion,” there is a section dedicated to helping men deal with their partner, friend, or family member’s abortion. This section deals mainly with identifying and locating the feelings related to his experience of abortion and the goal is to promote healing.<sup>54</sup> In this particular section of *Peace After Abortion*, the author directly addresses the reader and highlights the specific challenges faced by men in dealing with post-abortion feelings. Ava Torre-Bueno articulates to the reader:<sup>55</sup>

Talking about it is exactly what you need to do. If it doesn't feel safe to talk to your friends about this, give yourself the gift of a few sessions with a therapist who can listen and help you sort out your feelings. It's tough work sometimes but it can help you feel like the man you want to be.<sup>56</sup>

In addition, some of the discourses are oriented toward the family and friends of women who have chosen to have an abortion. The content contains an emphasis on inter-

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<sup>54</sup>‘For Men.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web March 11, 2005.

<<http://www.peaceafterabortion.com/men.html>>

<sup>55</sup> Ava Torre-Bueno is an author of a post-abortion healing book titled: *Peace After Abortion*. She is a psychotherapist that has extensive experience in counseling women who have abortions and is also the primary author of the website <[www.peaceafterabortion.com](http://www.peaceafterabortion.com)>

<sup>56</sup> ‘For Men.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web March 11, 2005.

<<http://www.peaceafterabortion.com/men.html>>

personal dynamics of the relationship between the woman who has had an abortion and the partner, family member or friend. Though the discourses differ in their content as the subject changes, the primary goal of *post-abortion healing* remains the same throughout the discourses. Furthermore, the common thread that binds these various discourses lies in the psychological discursive elements surrounding the emotional impacts of having procured an abortion.

### Motherhood and the subjectivity of women

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”  
Simone de Beauvoir

De Puy and Dovitch address, head on, some of the myths of motherhood. They acknowledge the stereotypical characteristics associated with being woman, being pregnant and all that being a mother represents. In addition, they denounce these myths in relation to their generalizing qualities. They also recognize some of the social roles and gains in sustaining such beliefs. According to De Puy and Dovitch, not every woman feels an overwhelming sense of joy over her pregnancy. They point to the relationship between women’s biological capacities to “create new life” and the social expectations and judgments imposed on her notion of her *self*. (De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 37) They relate the myths of motherhood to cultural factors in that “the assumption that a woman will want to bear a child is rooted in our cultural teachings [and] it is often considered a woman’s implicit moral responsibility to exercise care and to avoid hurting others in all her relationships.” (De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 38)

The cultural meaning surrounding motherhood and being woman penetrates the core of a woman's subjectivity and all that entails her sense of *who* she is (her self). Different feminist theories have explored the role that pregnancy has on the conceptualization and realization of the *self* in women. For example, Robin West writes that there are sharp differences in the way feminist theories have shaped the way pregnancy is viewed. For instance, cultural feminists tend to glorify pregnancy articulating that pregnancy "connects us with life." (West, 1988: 30), whereas radical feminists view of pregnancy is "a dangerous psychically consuming, existentially intrusive, and physically invasive assault on the mother's self-identity." (West, 1988: 30) These are clearly two very different and extreme points of view in regards to the construction of pregnancy and motherhood among feminist theories; I used these as examples to illustrate the direction(s) that either of these constructions could take conceptualizations of motherhood. Our notion of pregnancy and/or motherhood would therefore be very different depending on which would be more accepted or normalized through our institutional structures, functions, and practices.

Miller-McLemore writes about the common idealizations of motherhood and how we, in contemporary Western culture, have come to conceptualize them. She conceptualizes these idealizations within the discourses they are part of. According to Miller-McLemore, our common conceptualizations of motherhood are shaped and are a part of religious discourses and these discourses have an continue to play an important role in shaping the way we understand what being a woman and mother consists of. She writes about mothers trying desperately to live up to the idealized image of motherhood while

struggling with the harsh reality of things being 'not so perfect.' Miller-McLemore notes the evident (and not so evident) influences of religion on the construction of motherhood as constituting one of the most beautiful and desirable roles a woman can undertake. In this sense, motherhood elucidates a state of 'naturalness' or rather, that, according to religious discourses, it is considered 'natural' to want to be a mother. Miller-McLemore draws attention to a greater understanding of idealized notions of motherhood through religion and notes that the influences have been shown to be "historical and normative." (Miller-McLemore, 1999: 282)

The point I want to emphasize however lies in the connection between the notion of the *self* and pregnancy. Women's subjectivities are often conceptualized in terms of their relation to their reproductive capabilities. The self intermingles with pregnancy and all the social significations that being pregnant entails and therefore, when a woman chooses to terminate a pregnancy, she is ultimately challenging her self as well as society's values.

It is confusing and at times disconcerting, when De Puy and Dovitch acknowledge myths of motherhood and then at other points, perpetuate the very stereotypical and universalizing practices they denounce. There are many instances throughout the book where the authors revert to the kinds of discourses that perpetuate the more traditional and valued characteristics of being woman and mother. For instance, at the beginning of chapter two, De Puy and Dovitch situate the experience of deciding to abort as one that has lasting repercussions, for *any* woman. (De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 43) I strongly



argue against this kind of assumption and universalization of women's experiences with deciding to abort. Not *any* and *all* women necessarily experience lasting repercussions after an abortion, and certainly not all women experience abortion in the same manner. Though the authors make the disclaimer at the beginning of their book that this book is intended for women who feel they have unresolved issues with their experiences of abortion, they nonetheless universalize the subject throughout the book.

Furthermore, many feminist scholars have worked hard to dispel myths surrounding notions of 'maternal instinct' or inherent characteristics of women. Some of these myths included the "maternal bliss myth – that motherhood is the joyful fruition of every women's aspirations." (Johnston and Swanson, 2003: 22) According to Johnston and Swanson, these kinds of myths "perpetuate[s] systems of patriarchy by attributing any maternal happiness and dissatisfaction to failure of the mother." (Johnston and Swanson, 2003: 22) Likewise, theorists like Nancy Chodorow have played key roles in perpetuating these kinds of notions whereby she believes "that the primary cause of maternal myths is the perpetuation of patriarchy." (Johnston and Swanson, 2003: 22) These kinds of arguments situate women's roles in a passive context whereby women are 'victims' of patriarchy and are therefore 'stuck' in specified social roles. Patriarchy has a pre-determined set of roles for men and women, and women simply act out those roles. These arguments fail to acknowledge women as active players in society, as aware and conscious beings, fully capable of taking on specific roles. On the other hand, I argue that while our social structures reflect a certain patriarchal (ontological) outlook, and the institutionalized practices that accompany this outlook undeniably sustain such myths, I

do not conceive of women as passive actors in this process. Rather, I conceptualize women as active participants, possessing will, agency and an ability to resist such social constructions. I argue that some women may play a role in sustaining such myths because, unlike Chodorow's arguments that tend to situate women in a more vulnerable position in terms of power relations, women in post-abortion discourses are actually very much a *part* of the discourses as subjects and objects of 'truth' as well as active social actors in the perpetuation of normative values of motherhood and femininity.

Using the kinds of characteristics commonly identified as constituting self-help groups, De Puy and Dovitch practice reinforcing the characteristics of membership and "self-stigmatization." (Katz, 1993: 275-276) Hence, in the case of most post-abortion discourses, the reader is 'forced' to identify herself as a woman that is 'suffering' from post-abortion distress of some sort, and thus she participates in her own "self-stigmatization" (as well as self-objectification) by identifying and belonging to a group that is highly stigmatized to begin with.<sup>57</sup>

Furthermore, if one observes the "Peace After Abortion" website, it is clearly noted on the principal page, that, "If you found your way to this page, chances are **you're a woman who is hurting in some way after an abortion.** This web site is meant especially for you... If you are having distress after an abortion, you can begin the

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<sup>57</sup> The group I am referring to informally is the "group" of women who choose abortion. Abortion remains a highly stigmatized topic in our culture. Also, the term "forced" does not insinuate a form of external coercion.

healing process by exploring these pages.”<sup>58</sup> The author ensures “subject membership” by outlining the principal motive (post-abortion distress) for consulting this particular website.

Personal narratives are used throughout the book to help the reader relate to and identify specific emotions associated with her own experience. They are used to describe the kinds of feelings and experiences that some women have gone through at different stages of their experience leading *to* and *after* their abortion(s). Another function of the personal narratives is to encourage other women (namely the reader) to share her story with others ‘just like her.’ The authors describe a kind of solitude and loneliness experienced by women who are faced with an abortion. They caution against the ‘unhealthy kind of solitude’ and emphasize that the women who have experienced an abortion “can experience separateness as either a trigger for emotional growth or an isolated prison.” (De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 65) The author’s expertise dictates what is considered an acceptable level or experience of solitude or isolation. The use of the personal testimonies highlights the role of the expert in the healing process of recovering from an abortion. DePuy and Dovitch use the stories as a platform to base their healing recommendations.

### A ‘Feminine’ Self

Smith’s contributions regarding the constitution of subjectivity, as it is conceived of in notions of femininity, are useful in relation to post-abortion discourses and how *they*

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<sup>58</sup>‘Peace After Abortion.’ Accessed from the World Wide Web March 16, 2005.  
<<http://www.peaceafterabortion.com/>> Ava Torre Bueno (bold character added)

constitute subjectivity. Smith situates notions of femininity in the experiences of our (women's) everyday lives. According to Smith, "femininity is addressed as a complex of actual relations vested in texts." (Smith, 1990: 163) Furthermore, the subject is not external to the social structures and organization of discourses but rather, it is integrated within it.

Gilligan's "ethic of care" argument serves to strengthen the functional ambitions of the individual in pursuing and actualizing personal salvation through deep examination and re-invention of the self. For instance, here is the testimony of a woman named Anne:

I felt so loved by the people around me and so despised by strangers I didn't even know! It seemed like every time I turned on the news I was hearing another angry voice telling me that I, personally, was a bad human being for having an abortion. Even though I regard myself as pretty aware, those "other" voices kept telling me, "You are wrong. You are evil." Intellectually, I knew they were wrong to judge me, but just like me, these other folks felt so sure. I couldn't help but wonder, "Are they right?" I had to work hard to reaffirm my own truth and deal with the guilt." (De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 97)

Anne is measuring her *self* against her own personal ethics but also against the ethics of *others*. She is engaged in a complex relation with "others" and what is generally constituted as the cultural moral norms and values. The woman affirms her decision to abort by exercising self-help techniques, based on psychoanalytic therapeutic values that have permitted her to reach some kind of freedom from the guilt she experienced when she was faced with the conflicts of choosing her *self* over *others*.

In addition, Gilligan's "ethic of care" can be theorized as being an integral part of the discourses for it is this kind of conceptualization of women that seems to assert a certain kind of security with these discourses. For instance, women share their personal stories on different Internet message boards, in support groups, in interviews, etc. Narratives have been integrated in and have become an important part of post-abortion discourses; the narratives serve a purpose or function. The function of the narratives is to reinforce a message that conveys a particular kind of 'truth;' a 'truth' that sustains the perception of abortion as being a traumatic and difficult life experience. In addition, De Puy and Dovitch use the personal testimonies of abortion experiences to solidify their main arguments surrounding the necessity for healing and recovery.

#### Subjectification through Emotions

"It occurred to me, at that point, that I was protesting against myself for incidents that I felt guilty about: getting pregnant, having an abortion and letting myself down." (De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 93)

The authors describe guilt as a "normal" emotion, to be felt by any post-abortion woman. (De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 87) De Puy and Dovitch state that some level of guilt is essentially inevitable when it comes to post-abortion emotions. According to De Puy and Dovitch, guilt is an emotion that is tied to significations of what is considered right and wrong, hence, it is deeply rooted in our sense of morality. They explain the notion of guilt by utilizing human development discourses rendered popular by psychology. Different developmental stages are used to explicate the early sources of guilt-producing events.

The exploration of guilt-inducing sources is contextualized in a gendered manner. For example, De Puy and Dovitch describe a “girl’s early years” as depending on “parents and authority figures for validation in order to solidify her positive self-image.” (De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 88) The authors participate in a gendered dialogue that serves to impede a deeper social inquiry and understanding of what constitutes guilt-inducing/producing behaviors or acts. Guilt represents the disaccord between what one considers is morally right, and the “mistake” that one has committed. The authors relate the emotion of guilt to a girl’s sense of her *self*, or, in other words, her self-esteem. (De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 88-89) In this manner, guilt is inextricably tied to subjectivity. According to the authors, there are positive or constructive guilt feelings and then there are those that are counter-productive or even harmful. The more constructive guilt feelings are associated with a girl’s ability to affirm her sense of self, by detaching her self from what her parents’ expectations and desires are for her. For example, a younger girl (less than 5 years of age) may feel guilty when she decides to go against her parents’ wishes because she is ultimately searching for approval at this stage. (De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 88-89) As the girl gets older, she develops a stronger sense of self and feels justified and more confident in her progressive detachment from her parents’ directives. (De Puy and Dovitch, 1997: 89)

The woman in the quote at the beginning of this section is describing the guilt she is feeling after having procured an abortion. She clearly links her sense of guilt with her sense of her *self* or identity. For example, “letting herself down” implies that there are underlying expectations of what she interprets and conceptualizes as the ‘right’ thing to

do. Her sense of morality is intricately linked to her sense of identity in this case as she interprets her actions to be inferior to the moral integrity she values. How does this happen? She employs much of the same evaluative techniques as used in self-help methods. She identifies the problematic emotion or feeling, traces it back to the problematic event or decision, and then accepts it for what it is (in this case, the bad decision to get pregnant in the first place, followed by the decision to abort) and finally, she transposes those negative feelings onto her sense of identity (self) as it is an integral part of who she is as a person. She is measuring herself against her personal ethics but also against the ethics of others. She is engaged in a complex relation with “others” and what is generally constituted as a normalized morality.

### Confession and Power

Confession has been integrated in different contemporary practices of our culture and they have been normalized in psychological practices. We confess everything; confessing leads to feeling better about one’s self and those who refuse to engage in confession are punished, pathologized, or depicted as being in ‘denial.’ Moreover, confession is a way of producing or propagating specific ‘truths’ in our culture. Foucault notes that, “confession became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth.” (Foucault, 1978: 59)

There are confessional elements and power relations exercised within, through and by the discourses whereby subjectivity is molded. In relation to post-abortion discourses, I argue that one of the ways in which power is exercised, is through a strategy involving

pastoral power. Pastoral power is comprised of comprehensive and detailed characteristics but I will focus on the specific characteristic relating to the “form of power whose ultimate aim is to assure individual salvation.” (Foucault, 1982, p. 214) On the website of “Hope After Abortion,” there are references to forgiveness of oneself (and others who have had an abortion) within the context of specific prayers with a Christian - Catholic orientation. The complete website is built on the notion of ‘hope and healing,’ suggesting there is something to heal from but also that there is hope to achieve some kind of inner peace after what is seemingly described as a ‘traumatic’ event in one’s life. Some of the prayers recite verses such as:

“For parents who have lost a child to abortion and whose hearts are closed to the mercy of God, that they might know the grace of repentance, confession and the healing embrace of the Father; we pray to the Lord...”<sup>59</sup>

The confessional elements are evident in this prayer verse. The goal of this kind of confession is to be forgiven and ultimately achieve some sense of freedom or salvation. The desire for forgiveness reflects the implication that a sin (an act of moral wrongdoing) was committed in the first place and in order to experience a healthful and peaceful life, one must confess, be forgiven, and then one shall, only then, emancipate oneself.

The confession is considered the “West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth.” (Foucault, 1978: 59) In this sense, Foucault refers to the confessional requirements indoctrinated in Catholic practices that have thus transcended common everyday practices of Western culture. Confessional elements and mechanisms have

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<sup>59</sup><<http://www.hopeafterabortion.com/hope.cfm?sel=G84D>> retrieved: March 19, 2005. see section: “Intercession for those involved in abortion.”



been widely reinforced in Western culture, so much so that Foucault calls “Western man” a “confessing animal!” (Foucault, 1978: 59) Confession is an integral part of post-abortion discourses. Confession elements are embedded in various aspects of the discourses but appear mainly in the sections dealing with the emotional aspect(s) of the post-abortion experience. For example, guilt is identified as one of the dominant emotional reactions after having experienced an abortion. Forgiveness of one’s self is considered important and can be achieved through various mechanisms. Rituals are a suggested form of forgiveness or atonement within the discourses. Foucault discusses the ritualized elements of confession where confessing involves relations of power.

Furthermore, power is not exercised *on* the subject, but *through* the subject. A woman is obliged to confess if she wants to get better. The discourses help her do this and they also help her attain emancipation from these negative or impeding emotions. If she desires to be a better person, and lead a productive and successful life, then she must engage with the discourses at a level where she must identify her feelings, confess those feelings, and consequently, she will experience freedom and achieve a ‘true’ sense of *self*. The following quote demonstrates the transformation experienced by one woman after she sought counseling:

“After the abortion, I never would have believed things could get better. But, amazingly, since my post-abortion counseling I have experienced hope and healing and self-forgiveness.” - Janice<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> <<http://hopeafterabortion.com/hope.cfm?sel=C18L>> accessed on March 11, 2005 (see Healing section, 1<sup>st</sup> personal account)

These few words from Janice reveal the centrality of post-abortion counseling and the role that post-abortion discourses play in the shaping of the post-abortion experience. According to Janice, before post-abortion counseling, there were negative feelings associated to her abortion experience. However, after having had counseling, Janice reveals that she is essentially freed from her negative associations with her experience of having had an abortion and that she has achieved this through post-abortion counseling methods. She has now re-defined her experience as one of “hope and healing and self-forgiveness.”

#### An element of ‘truth’ to the confession?

The confessional elements of the discourses enable them to constitute ‘truths’ in our culture. The power relations involved in confession constitute surrendering a part of our selves to a perceived ‘expert’ or as Foucault puts it, “the authority who requires the confession.” (Foucault, 1978: 61) In the case of post-abortion discourses, psychologists largely represent the ‘authority’ figures. With this said however, psychologists are not ‘authority’ figures in the sense that they possess a kind of power over the subject (women), but rather, their ‘authority’ is a direct consequence of the relation between the subject and the text. For example, women participate in relations with the text through narratives. Women are encouraged to read other women’s stories about experiences of abortion and they are, in many instances, encouraged to share their own stories. The sharing of stories is integrated and conceptualized as part of the healing process.

## Self-Esteem

The notion of self-esteem ranks as an important concept within the post-abortion discourses I examine in this thesis. Self-esteem is omnipresent within self-help discourses. The notion of self-esteem has garnered much attention in recent years due to its proliferation in various aspects of our cultural discourses, with particular attention to psychological and political discourses. The notion of self-esteem is but one example of how an inconsequential term infiltrates the various aspects of a culture, its practices and reaches the core of the individual being, thus, becoming part of his/her subjectivity. In this section of my thesis, I will examine the role of self-esteem as a 'truth' or 'knowledge' within our culture. I will describe a historical path leading to the acquiescence of self-esteem as a 'truth' in different disciplinary realms (how it became objectified), and ultimately penetrated the subjectivity of individuals, their practices and social relations.

According to Steven Ward, the notion of self-esteem is a rather recent concept dating back to the early twentieth century. Ward relates the earliest conceptualizations of self-esteem to the discipline of psychology, as well as other "writers like William James, C.H. Cooley, and G.H. Mead." (Ward, 1996: 8) This period in time marked a shift in the discipline of psychology whereby it oriented its study to more in-depth examinations of the *self*. (Ward. 1996: 8) The notion of self-esteem gained conceptual status as it was introduced in different disciplinary discourses and practices. For example, Ward attributes the successful course of self-esteem to elevated conceptual acceptance from the "move[ment] from being a peripheral concept employed by theoreticians to an

indispensable concept for doing the normal day-to-day science of psychology and psychotherapy.” (Ward, 1996: 8) In other words, the concept of self-esteem had to be, in many ways, normalized into everyday psychological and psychotherapeutic practices in order for it to gain force to become a concept of ‘truth.’ Furthermore, in order for a concept to garner the distinction of being considered a ‘truth,’ Ward points to the necessity for the concept to “enroll enough allies so that it can spread and become stronger.” (Ward, 1996:8) By this, Ward means that the concept must insinuate itself in the practices of other ‘well-respected’ realms of knowledge within a given society or culture.

I use Ward’s conceptualization of self-esteem as a ‘truth’ in our culture as an example to illustrate the pervasiveness of specific methods to ensure the propagation of very specific sets of knowledge or ‘truths.’ In relation to post-abortion discourses, religion and morality (for example) are manifested in our common understanding(s) of what abortion is and thus have contributed to the building of a particular kind of ‘truth.’ The field of psychology has evidently gained popularity over recent decades and our cultural practices uncover a deep understanding and ‘internalization’ of key psychological concepts. This impacts the way we, in our culture, conceptualize our every day world. The Internet websites and book that I have analyzed in this thesis reveal an intimate relationship between psychology (and psychiatry) and the way the experience of abortion is perceived and understood. This relationship solidifies the bond between ‘truth’/knowledge and the experience of abortion. In addition, the bond between ‘truth’ and the experience of abortion is made stronger in many ways through the medium through which information

about the experience of abortion is disseminated; that is, through textual means. Texts are an important source of information but they are also an important source of dissemination and in that way, texts can be appropriated as an active and/or relational medium.

In relation to textual information, Smith recognizes the relevance and value of studying texts in various disciplines including that of sociology. According to Smith, “texts are an active process.” (Smith, 1990: 215) By this, Smith means that texts are attributed meaning *by* and *through* the “producer” of the text (i.e. person, organization, etc.) but the text is involved in a deeper, more complex relationship with the reader once it is made public. In many ways, text is “rigid” in that it is detached from the producer however, it remains a fluid kind of relationship because the reader is involved in an indirect relationship with the producer of the text, the text itself, the meaning of the text (through interpretation) and ultimately, the reader may choose to act (or react) after this “interaction” with the text. “They,” according to Smith, are involved in “an active social process.” (Smith, 1990: 215) Smith conceptualizes discourse in a similar way that Foucault does in his work. Discourses do not “stand” on their own but rather, are involved in a dynamic relationship with individuals in our society, our social institutions, our mode(s) of government, etc. More specifically, when Smith refers to texts, she is referring to not only concrete written texts, but the “inscriptive processes” present in our everyday lives (i.e. advertisements, television, etc.) (Smith, 1990: 217) Furthermore, according to Smith, texts/discourses are “situated in and structure social relations... in which people are actively at work.” (Smith, 1990: 162) In this sense, according to

Smith, texts/discourses extend beyond a relation at the individual level and thus relate to/with the “larger” constitutive aspects of our society.

Smith explores the concept of “femininity as discourse” within our social practices.

According to Smith, the notion of femininity is constructed and sustained through specific discourses in our culture. She takes a closer look at the role of what constitutes as fashionable in relation to the female body image as directed by and through various discourses in our culture. Smith argues that, “the discourse of femininity articulates a moral order vested in appearances to a market and the production of commodities.”

(Smith, 1990: 171) In this sense, Smith brings our attention to the significance of discourses of femininity and their relation to the larger picture involving social structures and social order in our culture. Discourses of femininity necessitate very particular ideals of what it means to be a successful, attractive and productive woman in our society.

Discourses of femininity dictate much more than a set of standards for beauty in our society. They help shape the norms and values related to being woman and all that being woman entails and represents but furthermore, women act *within* and *through* those discourses. In relation to post-abortion discourses, there are hints of what being woman *means* as well as what being woman *should* mean.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion

This thesis has shown how a feminine subjectivity is constructed and sustained through different post-abortion discourses in our culture. I have also illustrated the discursive framework that shapes an abortion experience in a particular way. I have argued that the dominant representation of an abortion experience is that it is a significant, life-altering and often traumatic event in a woman's life. The majority of the discourses I have observed for this thesis, concentrate on the emotional aspects of an abortion experience.

There have been numerous psychological studies in recent years that have examined the emotional effects of abortion on women. Different studies revealed that women who experienced abortion were more likely to experience some kind of psychological or psychiatric health issue, even years after their abortion. In this regard, emotional responses after an abortion were indicators of specific mental health risks. In contrast to these types of results, critics like Brenda Major have extensively documented that most women who have an abortion experience do not experience the negative repercussions emphasized in other studies but rather, experience a sense of relief. More importantly perhaps are her critical analyses of the biased methodological approaches employed in many of these studies. She critiques different sources for their consistently biased research approaches in regards to a one-sided representation of women's experiences with abortion. These are the kinds of elements that frame an abortion experience in a particular way as well as enabling the characterization of abortion as we have come to understand it in our culture.

Different issues help propagate the perception of abortion as a ‘traumatic’ experience. Part of these issues is the need to categorize or classify all things in our culture. For example, different psychologists, organizations and activists support the claim of the existence of post-abortion-stress-syndrome (PASS.) I argue that, this too, is a concept that has been socially constructed, mainly to serve very specific political purposes.<sup>61</sup>

Different personal narratives support and contribute to this kind of representation of an abortion experience. Women’s emotional responses (i.e. sadness, grief, depression, guilt, shame, anger) after an abortion have, in large part, been normalized as a ‘natural’ and expected outcome of an abortion experience. The normalization of relatively negative emotions surrounding an abortion experience reflects the more dominant and ‘traditional’ views surrounding women’s subjectivities in our culture. I have argued that women’s subjectivities are constructed through various social practices in our society. For instance, women in our culture continually ‘perform’ their gendered subjectivities by walking, talking, dressing and acting in a calculated manner that enhances or places into evidence their desired feminine qualities. In addition, I argue that women’s subjectivities have been shaped by and through these kinds of social processes, reinforcing ‘traditional’ norms and values surrounding our cultural interpretations of being woman. I use this kind of argument to provide a foundation for the power relations and persistent ‘truths’ yielded *by* and *through* post-abortion discourses.

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<sup>61</sup> Some possible political purposes that such diagnoses or notions like ‘PASS’ can serve relates to pushing views that reinforce the notions that abortions are essentially ‘bad’, that abortions are detrimental to the family unit, that abortions are morally unacceptable according to specific religious teachings, etc.



Our cultural representations of ‘woman’ surround idealized notions of femininity and motherhood. These cultural idealizations have contributed to the construction of feminine subjectivities as synonymous with the qualities attributed to femininity and motherhood. Some of these qualities lie in typical characterizations of femininity such as being soft, nurturing, caring for others, being selfless and so on. In addition, our cultural idealizations of motherhood revolve mainly around these kinds of qualities; a ‘good’ mother is one that nurtures and takes care of her family above all else. Being a mother is her primary responsibility and priority. She is literally conceived as selfless in that she operates through the caring of others.

Theorists like Carol Gilligan have contributed to a perpetuation of this kind of feminine classification of qualities through her studies on women’s moral development.

Psychoanalytic theories have shaped and continue to shape the way we interpret certain social behaviors, especially those behaviors as exhibited by different genders. In relation to post-abortion, women who have chosen to procure an abortion are essentially challenging the socially constructed classifications of ‘maternal instinct.’

The representation of women’s experiences with abortion reflects the kinds of generalized, stereotypical views our culture continues to support. In some ways (but by *no means* all women), we can say that women have internalized this particular notion of self (as weaker and emotional) and continue to perpetuate such notions by participating in the discourses through narratives. It is thus not surprising at this point that post-abortion

discourses tend to fall in line with common conceptualizations of what women should be like given the institutionalized practices of our society.

To take this discussion one step further, I noted earlier in this thesis that one of the main purposes of narratives was to sustain the perception of abortion as a negative experience. This is one argument that I present but I would also like to acknowledge that personal narratives are also very useful for many women and yield great benefits. They provide a safe space/outlet for sharing stories that would likely otherwise go unheard, be ignored, or simply have no forum. This is especially relevant when considering a taboo subject such as abortion. I believe that narratives are an important avenue for women to explore and share personal stories and it also creates an opportunity for women to ‘gather’ and mobilize around a specific topic that concerns their needs and place in society. I have tried to remain loyal to my original intention that I would not try to claim a certain truth but rather, that I would explore post-abortion discourses and the frameworks that surround them. In this effort, I have gained knowledge about the mechanisms *by* and *through* which personal narratives, information, and texts maneuver from and around. And though I support sharing personal narratives, I have gained an increased awareness of the systems that regulate, manipulate and produce the kind of information being shared.

The methods employed in this research were based on identifying and characterizing specific elements found within different websites and one specific book. The sources were chosen by conducting a kind of literature review of what was available on the

World Wide Web, using a popular search engine called “google.”<sup>62</sup> I included a description of common elements found within the different data sources. In addition, my descriptions included details on general tone and presentation of the websites and book in order to provide the reader with a general idea of what the websites are like. I justify my choice for analyzing websites by highlighting the relevance of this kind of technological medium of information in our present day culture.

The analysis chapter provides a more in-depth look into the various websites and the book I have chosen to base my arguments on. I construct my arguments around the main research questions I have identified in my first chapter. The main questions fueling my analysis were: How is the post-abortion experience framed and more specifically, what are the elements that frame the experience of abortion? What is the constitution of these discourses in terms of their relation to gender, subjectivity and motherhood? How are notions of gender and mothering sustaining the particular framing of an abortion experience as a traumatic, life changing, and difficult experience?

### Limitations

It became very clear to me, early on, that I could not conduct an in-depth analysis of every aspect of the websites I have chosen to include in my analysis thus leading to different kinds of possibilities for future analysis. For example, there are numerous pages and links to different sources of information on the websites. These links lead to different kinds of information. Furthermore, the contents of the websites are updated and change on a regular basis thus making it difficult to conduct a comprehensive analysis.

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<sup>62</sup> This search engine may be found on the following Internet address <[www.google.com](http://www.google.com)>

With this said however, it is nonetheless important to explore the content of web pages because the Internet is clearly an increasingly accessible and relevant medium of information in our culture. Though the information is fluid and ever changing on the Internet, there remains an important need for diverse academic analyses exploring the framework of Internet discourses, the use of this medium and how it affects different social processes.

### Further Research

The psychological literature surrounding abortion has shifted the focus of abortion concerns from mainly medical or physiological aspects to a focus on the emotional responses associated with an abortion experience. This shift has marked post-abortion discourses in the sense that they have played an important part in the normalization of the emotional connections and a post-abortion experience. It almost seems 'natural' for us to think of grief, sadness, guilt, regret and depression as 'normal' responses to having procured an abortion. This is in large part sustained through our social constructions of female subjectivity whereby feminine characteristics are associated and are symbiotic with notions of motherhood and an inherent desire to bear life. We tend to think that 'ordinary' women would not, under 'normal' circumstances, willingly place themselves in a position where they have to choose to abort or not. In this sense, it facilitates a conceptualization of the woman who chooses abortion as victim, helpless, weak and even sometimes 'bad.' She is essentially going against the grain of her society and is fully aware of the consequences of her actions. The conceptualization of abortion as a

negative, life-altering experience in a woman's life helps define the subjectivities of the women who seek abortions in a specific way.

Our culture upholds a specific kind of 'truth' about life and fulfillment. Psychological discourses have played an important role, especially since the 1980's, in shaping and perpetuating views of a complete, prosperous and happy life. Happiness has been defined as a kind of liberation of all things negative (whether they are emotions, employment, relationships, etc.) as well as an accentuation of positive elements in life like 'good' self-esteem, financial stability, etc. A state of fulfillment is achieved by learning about one's self and improving one's self. This requires a yearning for change but also a desire to re-work and re-evaluate the self. In many ways, this has become an 'obsession' in our culture. We learn early on that it is primordial to have a high self-esteem and as Steven Ward points out in one of his articles, notions like that of self-esteem have been normalized in our everyday lives, and vocabulary.

The confession plays a significant role in attaining a certain level of fulfillment. In relation to the construction of a feminine subjectivity through confessional elements, a woman engaging in [power] relations with post-abortion texts is faced with the messages that elude to the notion that confessing her feelings, and acknowledging her abortion will enable her to 'heal' from the experience and move on with her life. Through the process of confession, she re-affirms her feminine whereby she identifies as a woman that made a 'mistake', having failed to fulfill certain obligations related to being a [good] mother and

incidentally not meeting the standards of femininity by choosing herself rather than the other (being selfish.)

Though research on post-abortion issues tries to illuminate effects of abortion on women, they lack a comprehensive examination of possible social factors that lead to certain reactions. What are the effects of power relations on women's responses after abortion? What are the social dynamics leading to a specific account of an abortion experience? For example, what are the elements that lead to the conceptualization of an abortion experience as traumatic or, in contrast, as positive/healthy? What role does the church in our cultural practices play in enabling the construction of an abortion experience as traumatic and/or bad?

#### Final Thought

Through my analysis of the websites: Hope After Abortion, the PPFC, Peace After Abortion and the book, "The Healing Choice," I have demonstrated that abortion discourses are situated within a particular discursive framework about abortion. They are consistently representing abortion in a particular way that emphasizes the negative emotional responses of an abortion experience. I would like to end this thesis by providing a brief quote relating to a more positive response to abortion that a woman experienced. Her remark opens up a new way of thinking about abortion and demonstrates the need for a more diverse representation of women's experiences as they are lived in everyday lives. A woman anonymously responded in a research study:

I felt a confidence in myself I hadn't before. I found too that I didn't need to play the 'little girl,' the helpless female to my partner so much. (Boyle, 1997: 121)

Though women's more positive experiences of abortion are more difficult to find, they are there. I argue that there are different reasons for neglecting or failing to represent abortion experiences in a more diverse manner. Some of the reasons may include notions of fear in terms of positive representations of abortion that may lead to the use of abortions as a regular or normalized contraceptive measure. In addition, abortion remains controversial in large part because we (our culture) are not comfortable nor have we attained a consensus on the existential, ethical, moral and philosophical issues associated with abortions such as the definition of 'personhood' or the beginning of life. It is time to recognize that there is no universal woman, and that our experiences are as diverse as the places and experiences we come from. Representing women's experiences in a way that recognizes our diversity not only allows for a more comprehensive outlook on abortion but it also opens the door to women participating in the conceptualization of their own experiences and 'truths.'

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## Appendix A

Note: Not all elements of this web page were transferable. For a complete record, please visit the website directly at: <http://www.hopeafterabortion.com/hope.cfm?sel=A31Q>

### **Understanding Abortion's Aftermath**

Since 1973, there have been more than 36 million abortions in the United States. While some women report relatively little trauma following abortion, for many, the experience is devastating, causing severe and long-lasting emotional, psychological and spiritual trauma.

Evidence of post-abortion trauma is increasingly attested to by psychologists, counselors and those involved in post-abortion ministry. We now know, for example, that women hurt by abortion may have some or many of the following symptoms:

- Low self-esteem
- Grief (mild to profound)
- Depression (sometimes to the point of suicidal thoughts and attempts)
- A sense of alienation from family and friends
- A feeling of being 'numb,' not able to feel joy from activities that used to be pleasurable
- Isolating self from others to avoid discussing the abortion experience with them
- Guilt and shame
- Difficulty concentrating
- Anger toward self, or the child's father, or others involved in the abortion decision
- Sleep disorders
- Abortion-related nightmares, flashbacks or even sounds of a baby crying
- Alcohol and drug problems, to dull the sorrow
- Desire for a 'replacement' baby
- Anniversary reactions of grief or depression on the date of the abortion or the baby's expected due date
- Problems bonding with her other children (being over-protective but emotionally distant)
- Fear that God will punish her, or is punishing her

Some, especially young girls, experience symptoms soon after the abortion. Counselors tell us, however, that it is more common for the symptoms to occur over the course of five to twelve years after the abortion before a woman seeks help.

Abortion's aftermath is largely ignored by the general public. Groups organized to protect the availability of abortion claim that abortion is no different from any surgical procedure and that pro-life groups are fabricating the existence of post-abortion suffering. Consequently, many women think that their grief reactions are somehow abnormal and believe that there is nowhere to turn for help.

Many women who have walked a path of grief and hopelessness after abortion, usually alone, eventually begin to understand that they have a deep spiritual wound. But sadly, they also are likely to believe that they have committed 'the unforgivable sin' and fear God's anger.



**How to Talk to a Friend  
Who's Had an Abortion**

**Adverse Psychological  
Reactions: A Fact Sheet**

**After the Abortion**  
*Paula Vandegaer, LCSW*

**Psychiatric Sequelae of  
Abortion: The Many Faces  
of Post-Abortion Grief**  
*E. Joanne Angelo, M.D.*

**Flaws in Post-Abortion  
Research**  
*David C. Reardon, Ph.D.*

**Suicide and Abortion: One  
Country's Experience**

**Additional Post-Abortion  
Research**

